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Judith Ann Humphrey B.A. (Hons)

LIBERATING IMAGES

A Feminist Analysis of the Girls' School-Story

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Liberating Images : A Feminist Analysis of the Girls' School- Story

Judith Ann Humphrey

The thesis uses a synthesis of feminist and literary theory to analyse the way in which girls' school-stories challenge and subvert traditional societal constructs and provide images of liberation for girls and women.

The literary implications of a woman-centred universe are addressed in a study of ***plot*** and ***character***. The texts provide a challenge to traditional literary representations of passive femininity, replacing them with images of active girls and women. There is tension between the domestic discourse and the discourse of adventure, but this is overcome by stress on character. The use of an interrogative subject position and of multiple and morally complex focalisers ensures that the identifying reader can maintain a position as subject within the text without being subjected to its ideology.

The liberating images of the books are seen in ***education, games, religion*** and ***friendship***. Girls were ***educated*** either to serve or to please men; the intellectual woman was an affront to the natural order as decreed by medicine and theology. School-stories challenge this by presenting for identification girls who find study exciting and fulfilling and professional women who have chosen a life connected with learning. ***Games*** for girls fundamentally questioned the construct of frail femininity shored up by medical theories of finite energy, by Darwinism and by the eugenics movement. ***Religion*** was a significant part of life, and the texts provide a rigorous analysis of faith. The role of the Headmistress, simultaneously omnipotent and strongly maternal, subverts the traditional image of woman and of God. Women have been defined socially by their relations to men and have been seen as incomplete without them. Close ***friendship*** for women was defined as diseased and problematic by the sexologists working at the beginning of the century. These relationships are reclaimed in school-stories in terms of deep, abiding love.

Contents

Introduction	p.1
 Chapter One 'Third-Rate Literature' A Review of the Critical Literature	 p.9
 Chapter Two 'A Passion for Learning' The Intellectual Woman : Education in the texts	 p.34
 Chapter Three 'A Rattling Good Yarn' The Active Woman : Plot in the texts	 p.71
 Chapter Four 'Who Is Sylvia?' The Questioning Woman : Character in the Texts	 p.92
 Chapter Five 'Playing The Game' The Strong Woman : Games in the Texts	 p.116
 Chapter Six 'My God - It's the Head!' The God-Woman : Images of Deity and Re-visions of Power in the Texts	 p.143
 Chapter Seven 'Love .. Love .. Love' The Woman-Loving Woman : Female Friendship in the Texts	 p.183
 Conclusion	 p.207
 Bibliography	 p.215

Introduction

This thesis is not concerned with children's literature in general, or even with the place within it of the school-story. It is concerned with the way in which the subtext of the school-story, a genre which has been perceived as a purely conservative reflection of the status quo, in fact deeply challenges and subverts traditional societal constructs and provides images of liberation for girls and women.

Girls' school-stories have been amongst the few texts written by women for women about women and, as such, in a patriarchal society they may be considered highly subversive. They have created a world where women are autonomous, authoritative and in control, where they are the most significant people in the universe, and where their lives, their intellectual and emotional development and their relationships with other women are prioritised. It is a world which provides alternatives to stereotypes of gender and societal constructs of femininity, and was for a long time the only challenge to what Adrienne Rich has seen as a 'universe of masculine paradigm'.¹ Even now school-stories are woman-centred in a way matched only by lesbian fiction, which is not accessible to or acceptable to all women.

The thesis examines the alternative life-views, role-models and possibilities of becoming for women which are inherent in school-stories and discloses the images which act as agents of liberation for the readers. It will:

- * provide a critical review of the genre;
- * account for the continuing popularity of an anachronistic form;
- * demonstrate that the genre provides an active and fore-grounded role for girls and gives autonomy and authority to women;
- * analyse the way in which these alternatives are accessed by the child reader;
- * examine the importance of school-stories to the adult reader;
- * investigate the ways in which school-stories challenge the traditional discourses of power in education, medicine and religion;
- * uncover and reclaim the liberating images contained for women and girls within the texts.

The project will attempt a feminist analysis, accepting Patricia Spacks' definition of this as 'any mode that approaches a text with primary concern for the nature of female experience in it, the fictional experience of characters ... the experience implicit in language and structure'.² Within this framework the thesis will examine the roots of some of the societal constructs of femininity which have operated to distort what women are and restrict what they might become; it will address the effects on women's lives and development in the fields of education, health, sexuality, religion and relationships. It is impossible to provide an exhaustive analysis of such far-reaching modes of thought, but the analysis will be extensive enough to demonstrate the need for and importance of the liberating image.

The thesis will not present school-stories in terms of children's literature. There is no attempt to relate the genre to any other form of writing for children; indeed, the fact that the texts were written for girls is only half of the story. Their unique interest lies in the power they exert over adult readers, and this fact testifies to the strength of society's constructs. If girls truly internalised the liberating images, there would be no need to return to them as adults. I would suggest that women access the image at an unconscious level and return to the texts when it becomes obvious in their lives that the traditional constructs are not working.

This attempt is in itself a challenge to traditional attitudes, as school-stories for girls have been perceived as second-class versions of a genre which was in itself treated with universal critical contempt and have, until recently, attracted scant attention in terms of any serious study. Yet, with a few exceptions, school-stories for girls have outlasted their masculine counterparts by half a century and have been immensely important in the lives of their readers.

The focus of the thesis - Elinor Brent-Dyer and others

The problem in looking at school-stories for girls is where to set the parameters, for there were very many authors and many were extremely prolific. To compound the

difficulties, background information has been, until very recently, almost non-existent, reflecting the lack of status of the genre.³

The development of the girls' school-story can be traced from Sarah Fielding's *The Governess or Little Female Academy* of 1749 through the educational tracts of the early nineteenth century (such as *At Home and At School* by Miss F****, published in 1828) to the novels of L.T.Meade in the 1890s, and was set in the formula in which it was to continue by Angela Brazil, in *A Fourth Form Friendship*, published in 1911.⁴ Brazil is one of the 'Big Four' of girls' school fiction together with Elsie Oxenham, Dorita Fairlie Bruce and Elinor Brent-Dyer, and these authors were commercially very successful between the wars and for many years afterwards (for example, by the time Dorita Fairlie Bruce's *Dimsie Grows Up* (1924) appeared in its first Australian edition (1947), sales of Dimsie books had reached half a million⁵). Brazil wrote fifty school-stories, Brent-Dyer fifty-nine about one school, plus a dozen other unrelated school-tales, Elsie Oxenham, at the peak of her popularity in 1936, had 52 titles in print, and, of Dorita Fairlie Bruce's thirty-nine published books, twenty-eight were school-stories.

These four have been represented in most bibliographies of children's literature; all are included in *The Biography Index*, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*, and *The Who's Who of Children's Literature*. Despite this apparent recognition, the attitude of critics to the genre can be seen in the fact that even the *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* loses its objectivity in this area, saying of Dorita Fairlie Bruce in the 1984 edition: 'Her books came in the 'reward' category and were published by the Oxford University Press, in the days before it had a more discriminating policy towards children's fiction.'⁶

As a result of the low status of the authors and the genre, adequate biographical information is available only for Brazil and Brent-Dyer, and the only other authors of the same period who are mentioned are Ethel Talbot (an author of over one hundred books between 1918 and 1948, who rates four lines in the *Oxford Companion*) and Nancy Breary, also presumably chosen because of the prolific nature of her work. Later, and more critically-acclaimed, writers (Antonia Forest, Mary Harris, Alice Lunt) do appear,

but, despite the strictures of the critics, it is the earlier books which seem to exercise emotional power over their readers.

I have therefore chosen to base the following study on the work of Elinor Brent-Dyer, partly because of the unusually full biographical information provided by Helen McClelland in *Behind the Chalet School*⁷, but much more importantly because Brent-Dyer has a unique significance within the genre. Her output was enormous, ranging from adventure tales to school geography readers, but the texts which have captured the imagination of generations of girls and women are the *Chalet School* books, a series of fifty-nine titles published between 1925 and 1970. The very longevity of Brent-Dyer's writing life gives the texts an interest matched by no other, but even more striking is her immense and longlasting popularity with females of all ages, classes and types. Hers are the only books which have never been out of print and have survived all the changes in attitudes to literature, education and women of the past seventy years. It is her 'fan clubs', too, which provide evidence of the deep importance of the texts to her female public. To make the point, however, that she is more than an isolated phenomenon and that the elements of attraction in her work are integral to the genre, I shall be referring to many other authors, though necessarily in less detail.

The liberating images uncovered by the thesis may be summarised as follows:

1. The Intellectual Woman (**Education** in the texts)

The history of girls' education illustrates the way in which the role of women has been envisioned as that of homemaker, with the function, according to class, of either servicing or pleasing men. The intellectual woman was seen as unnatural, an affront to both nature and God. Access to education was denied to women on the grounds of contemporary medical and theological theories which controlled and perpetuated societal constructs of femininity. School-stories provide a very direct challenge to this, as they present school as a normal place for a girl to be, and teachers as professional women who have chosen a life connected with learning and who can therefore provide an alternative view of what it is to be a woman. Those books which treat actual school-work seriously give a vivid picture of the excitement and fulfilment of study and broaden the concept of learning from the narrow boundaries of lessons to include the whole of life.

Girls prove their intellectual ability by succeeding at the traditional 'boys' subjects', but the continuing uncertainty about their role causes ambivalence which is epitomised in the attitudes to Domestic Science, which receives separate treatment. Girls, too, prepare themselves for all sorts of careers, and the opportunities here expand greatly as time goes on.

Although significant liberating images can be found in this area, the stress on entertainment in many authors and the concentration on action and plot rather than on the school itself restrict the possibilities. However, there are authors who give their readers the opportunity to discover different options for their lives by providing a fictional representation of an educative experience which itself becomes that experience.

2. The Active Woman (**Plot** in the texts)

The texts provide a challenge to traditional literary representations of passive femininity, replacing them with images of active girls and women (e.g. girl as rescuer not rescued, achiever not spectator, woman as autonomous and authoritative, creating her own story), but the problem with school fiction, which operates within a domestic discourse, is that the more active the plot element, the more unrealistic the action. Alternative possibilities are provided by stress on

3. The Questioning Woman (**Character** in the texts)

The stress in girls' fiction on character rather than action makes possible reader identification. This makes the female reader a subject within the text, but this can be a dangerous position, as the word has a dual meaning and the dominant ideology of the text can itself subject the reader. Therefore liberation requires a text that questions, even if almost subliminally, received assumptions. This can be achieved by subverting stereotypes (the Princess, the Mam'selle), by the use of multiple and morally complex focalizers, and by the use of adult focalizers which immeasurably widen the possibilities of identification.

Elinor Brent-Dyer is a prime example of best practice in this area; therefore the chapter concentrates mainly on her work, including her stress on adults, which is unique and which provides a much greater range of potential images. These subverted images are seen in the fields of:

4. **Games - The Strong Woman**

The traditional image is that of the 'wounded woman', physically feeble, and subject to the 'tyranny of her organisation'. This perception was shored up by medical theories of finite energy, by Darwinism and by the eugenics movement. Woman not only could not, but *should* not expend her limited energies on anything other than child-bearing. The development of games-playing was thus a great liberation (even in dress). Games were gradually seen as health-giving rather than health-threatening, but there was great fear of a loss of femininity in women embracing physical activity. This fear was actually well-founded, since games did help women to begin to 'lose' the constructs of femininity imposed on them by society.

There was also a moral dimension - games in boys' public schools had an entire moral ethos attached to them. Girls and women, who had been seen as morally frail, could now slot into this masculine construct of morality. They could become strong, but only by becoming a 'gentleman.' There is, however, an analysis by female writers of the masculine public school code. The final image is one of strong, responsible femininity, with a reclamation of both physical and moral strength.

5. **Religion - The God-Woman**

The texts demonstrate different approaches to religion culminating in a rigorous analysis of faith. They simultaneously provide images of all-powerful women in the headmistresses, and these culminate in specific images of deity. We are thus given the image of an omnipotent woman, but the problems of the nature of power which this reveals are avoided by an equally strong maternal function, which transmutes into the image of a maternal and all-loving God. This subverts both the traditional images of woman and the traditional images of God, giving power to the former and different possibilities of access to and relation with the latter. Woman can reclaim the Word and the Image of which she has been deprived by traditional theology, and can become both Ruler and Redeemer.

6. **Friendship - The Woman-loving Woman**

Women have been socially defined by their relations to men, and have been perceived as competing for male attention, and incapable of true friendship. The 'discovery' of female

sexuality in the early twentieth century lessened the possibilities of close friendship for women - relationships which had previously been seen as normal and even ennobling were now defined as diseased and problematic. These relationships are reclaimed in school stories, not in terms of sexual relationships, but in terms of deep and abiding love. The texts give extensive analyses of friendship and culminate in strong images of female love, which is prioritised.

I have chosen not to study the relationship between the texts and the actual schools. I wish to analyse fictional constructs and an experience of reading, and this has nothing to do with nostalgia for past actual life experiences. Most of the readers of school stories have never been near a boarding school, and none of them is operating under the illusion that they are being presented with real life. There is a relationship, and a fascinating one, between the fiction and the reality, but that, as Elinor Brent-Dyer was fond of saying, is a cat of a different colour.

- 1 in Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (London : The Women's Press Ltd., 1989), p.66
- 2 Patricia Spacks, 'The Difference It Makes,' in Elizabeth Langland and Walter Grove (eds), *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.14, quoted in Janet Todd *Feminist Literary History*, (Cambridge : Polity Press, 1988), p.5.
- 3 The Scholar Press is preparing an encyclopedia of school stories which will be published in April 2000, and will go a long way towards providing this information.
- 4 This was not her first book, nor even her first school-story, but *The Fortunes of Philippa*, the success of which encouraged her to continue to develop the genre, was quite a different type of book, being based on her mother's experiences at school and belonging in tone very much to the end of the previous century.
- 5 Rosemary Auchmuty, *A World of Girls*, (London : The Women's Press, 1992), p.15.
- 6 Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Pritchard, *Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, (London:OUP, 1984), p.86.
- 7 Helen McClelland, *Behind the Chalet School*, (Bognor Regis : New Horizon, 1981).

Chapter One: 'Third-Rate Literature'

A Review of the Critical Literature

'So far as I know', wrote George Orwell in 1939, 'there are extremely few school stories in foreign languages',¹ and the genre does, indeed, seem to be a peculiarly British phenomenon, as are the Victorian public schools that gave it birth. Despite this unique claim to our interest, school-stories in general have always existed in a state of ambivalence, being at once extremely popular with their readers and unanimously execrated by literary critics.

Until very recent years, those few critics who chose to discuss school-stories concentrated almost entirely on boys' books. There are sound and understandable reasons for this emphasis for although, as will be seen, the books were uniformly denounced as being beneath contempt as a literary form, the cult status of the boys' public schools gave at least some of the texts an almost mythic power within the culture of their time. Even today, Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* is synonymous with the genre, and it was hugely popular when it was first written.² Much praise was meted out for the book's 'realism', but the definition of this was two-fold. Certainly the book was thought to be 'true' i.e. mimetic, but it was also a picture of what a great public school ought to be like. If texts are sites of fantasy, this was an extremely comforting one, a fusion of perceived representational and symbolic truth which shored up the existing order very satisfactorily. Isabel Quigly, in her exhaustive study of the boys' school-story, *Heirs of Tom Brown* (1982) links the books very strongly with the historical reality and myth-making of the public schools: 'The school story flourished while the public schools, in their nineteenth century form, flourished. When they joined the modern world the school story died.'³

Nevertheless, it was accepted that school-stories were nonsense, and sometimes dangerous nonsense. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy takes it for granted that 'school literature is minor literature, good third rate: at this level books show the *idées reçues*, the accepted, the mores of their period',⁴ and Gillian Avery agrees, finding children's literature as a whole more valuable to the historian than to the literary critic.⁵

In 1939, George Orwell's well-known essay on 'Boys' Weeklies' condemned boys' school stories for their snobbery, xenophobia and deliberate incitement to fantasies of wealth and status⁶ and in 1948 Geoffrey Trease decried in *Tales Out of School* their 'absurd and repetitive plots; stereotyped characterization; latent (and sometimes blatant) snobbery and a laboured facetiousness of style'.⁷

Frank Eyre's influential *Children's Books in the Twentieth Century* (1971) claims that 'the school story was always an artificial type and its decline towards the middle of the century was neither unexpected nor deplored children's books will be better without it'.⁸

Later critics show greater insight. Much more sympathetic, for example (although again ignoring girls' stories), is the treatment by John Rowe Townsend in *Written for Children* (first published in 1965, though quotations are taken from the edition of 1974). He accepts the demise of the school-story - 'school appears in fiction as part of the pattern of daily life, but the school story as a separate genre hardly exists any more'⁹ - but regrets its passing because of the advantages it gives an author in terms of a self-contained world where children can be full citizens, the possibilities it offers of dramatic clashes between authority and the individual, and the moral issues involved in community life.

More profound possibilities are suggested by Claudia Nelson in her study *Boys Will Be Girls : The Feminine Ethic and Children's Fiction 1857-1917* (1991). Again based solely on boys' fiction, it puts forward the thesis that the 'evangelical' virtues which both the actual schools and the books tried to inculcate were 'feminine' ones, a fascinating proposition to which we shall return later.

There was, of course, some critical attention paid to girls' stories, particularly from the late seventies onwards. However, they suffered under the double liability of reflecting a system of education which had much less status than that of boys', and of being 'women's writing', with all its attendant implications of weakness and sentimentality. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy points out that there is a great deal less information about girls' public schools than there is about boys', and that there are far

fewer biographies, autobiographies or memoirs of women, reflecting their position in society.¹⁰

In her one brief chapter on girls' texts, Isabel Quigly remarks that girls' school-stories never achieved the status of the boys' books, and blames poor writing: 'girls' stories have a sociological interest ... but it is very hard to consider them as more than (occasionally charming) kitsch ... it is impossible to imagine irony or even imagination in them ... they never achieved recognition as ... serious writing'.¹¹

This perception of girls' school-stories as pulp fiction was echoed in society; Gillian Freeman records in her study of Angela Brazil's life and work (*The Schoolgirl Ethic*, 1976) that the author's 'Works' were condemned to two generations of schoolgirls by two successive High Mistresses of St. Paul's Girls' School, Miss Gray and Miss Strudwick, the latter even expressing a wish (on the first day of the autumn term, 1936) to collect all Miss Brazil's books and burn them.¹²

Critics of all decades, however, had to admit, usually with considerable bewilderment, that school-stories for girls had survived and were still being read. In Margery Fisher's *Intent Upon Reading*, published in 1961, the school-story is addressed in a chapter entitled *Fossils and Formulae*. Again it concerns mainly boys' books, but Fisher does commend Antonia Forest as having 'cut across the silliness and triviality which resulted from half a century of Angela Brazil and her imitators'.¹³ Of the earlier texts she can say only, 'these are survivals, and they must eventually suffer the fate of other books, creatures and tribes that prolong existence in a world that has passed them by'.¹⁴

Geoffrey Trease, as we have seen, concentrated mainly on boys' books in *Tales Out of School*, and the 1964 edition makes only a slight allusion to girls' fiction. In the original edition of 1948, however, he made the significant point that it was this which was still being written and read, while school-stories for boys had disappeared.¹⁵ Certainly a reading survey undertaken in the 1940s showed that school stories were the most popular fiction for girls in the 11-14 age group.¹⁶

Frank Eyre's judgment quoted above includes both girls' and boys' books, though he says very little about the former. What he does say betrays a certain puzzlement, again

because they have survived. He concludes that it must be because school is an important part of every child's life, but he does not address the question of why this survival is limited to girls' books.¹⁷

1976 saw the publication of Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig's comprehensive history of girls' fiction of all types, *You're a Brick, Angela*, supplemented in 1989 by *Chin Up, Chest Out, Jemima : A Celebration of the Schoolgirls' Story*, but despite the impressive volume of research in the first survey, the attitude of the authors to the school story is patronising in the extreme. Forced, for example, to acknowledge the continuing popularity of Elinor Brent-Dyer's Chalet School series, constantly in print from 1925 until the present, they conclude that the glamour of the location must compensate for the boredom of the series.¹⁸ In Cadogan/Craig's opinion, the possibilities of the series had been exhausted by the late 1940s (the first Chalet book was published in 1925, the last posthumously in 1970), and 'although the direct sociological content of the books always had been negligible, by the end of the series they had become absurdly anachronistic and were no longer explainable even as a queer manifestation of contemporary taste'.¹⁹ The fact that the books had survived could not be denied, but they were best read with sympathetic recognition of the fact that they were products of another era,²⁰ a judgment supported by Margery Fisher with her verdict: 'In Elinor Brent-Dyer's stories about the Chalet School ... we have another clear case of fossilisation. The appeal of these books ... is one of familiarity.'²¹

Bob Dixon's *Catching Them Young : Sex, Race and Class in Children's Fiction*, (1977) tries to do something rather different. He is concerned to expose gender stereotyping in children's books, and accepts as axiomatic the fact that books for girls endorse society's expectations of passivity and obsession with trivia. Girls can 'only escape from convention into dream',²² and this is what their fiction provides; because their activities are so much more restricted than those of boys, they live substitute lives through fiction.²³ In Dixon's analysis, this fits in with the popularity of school-stories: '[Brazil's] success may seem surprising as the stories tend to be boring and trivial, like her life, to judge from her autobiography however by this age [10-13] most girls are reconciled to their lot.'²⁴ Bob Dixon is angry at the existence offered to girls by society

and reinforced through fiction, and is trying to effect change, but he does not see beyond the surface of the text or realise that girls chose school-stories precisely because they were an alternative to the passivity and restricted possibilities of other texts.

A different approach : feminist criticism

Where the interest of feminist critics has focused on the books, their interpretations have been quite different from the traditional ones, and this has happened to an increasing extent. Even in 1972 Camilla Nightingale's reading is diametrically opposed to that of Bob Dixon; in an article which also points out the extent to which children's literature reinforces gender stereotyping, she exempts school-stories as being sites of adventure and rebellion for their girl heroines, and realises that, because male characters are practically non-existent, 'there is no need ... to inhibit the girls to maintain a standard of femininity'.²⁵

Nightingale is still operating in the realm of literary theory, but Janet Montefiore wrote in 1992 an article which applies a feminist psychoanalytical approach to the texts²⁶, and feminist historian Rosemary Auchmuty and sociologist Gill Frith have come to conclusions similar to those of Nightingale in subjecting the texts to analysis from the perspectives of radical feminism and socialist feminism respectively.

Gill Frith, writing in 1982, claims that 'the representation of femininity within the school-story clearly stands as an expression of resistance and subversion',²⁷ and again the girls in her survey enjoyed the books partly because girls *did* things, and the things that they did were exciting, partly because of the disruption of order and the transgression of the limits of authority implied within the books. Rosemary Auchmuty (1992) goes even further, to a reclamation of the texts as sites of empowerment and either refuge or identification, 'an alternative to the real world of patriarchal relations', a celebration of female autonomy in a number of different areas.²⁸

The same point is reiterated in Shirley Foster and Judy Simons' *What Katy Read* (1995) in their claim that school-stories have 're-invented the boundaries of the feminine in their extension of what it was possible for young women to achieve', while the school itself

'retained as a unit which can operate effectively without male interference ... functions implicitly as a critique of masculine hegemony'.²⁹ Auchmuty has gone further than any other critic in realising the importance of the books to adult women and the significance of the adult characters in the texts. Although her first study of the genre, *A World of Girls*, included more analysis of adults than is suggested by the title, its sequel, *A World of Women : Growing up in the Girls' School Story*, majors on the fact that in girls' stories, unlike those for boys, the characters grow up. This means that the novels can 'validate an extraordinary range of ways of being and acting as women'. As Auchmuty points out:

'Whether you are married or unmarried, old or young, housewife or career woman, family-centred or woman-centred, or any combination of these, you can find characters positively presented in your position.'³⁰

The importance of this statement is seen in the contrast between this position and the very circumscribed life choices available in much fiction for girls and women. The traditional choice of recreational reading for women of all classes has been romance, and, although feminist studies of the genre interpret its effect in sometimes very different ways, it cannot be denied that this type of fiction focuses on marriage and the family, and on exclusive relationships which are almost always heterosexual. Sally Mitchell sees school-stories, particularly those in magazines, as providing an alternative for girls who previously 'moved directly from childhood to womanhood, and read the same romantic tales as older working-class women'.³¹ Penny Tinkler, too, in her study of magazines for adolescent girls³² agrees that love is presented in romance magazines as the most powerful force in a woman's life; the independence which represents a rejection of patriarchal norms is always discovered to be a harmful error and the denouement leaves the heroine in a position of child-like dependence. Tinkler also points out that readers of these magazines were denied the affirmation of female bonding, which was available only in the portrayal of schoolgirl friendships in schoolgirl fiction. Romance literature 'leads to resolution through heterosexual union, which closes down the possibility of other desires and other narratives and relegates women to a position beyond culture and history, firmly placed in the realm of 'nature' and 'eternal truth''.³³

The final chapter of this thesis describes in more detail the societal processes which have taught women to feel incomplete without a man. Here it is enough to note that the romance genre feeds this perception and increases the anxiety of women that 'they will be nothing without the man ... woman is reduced to a longing ... and if [this] is not gained, the woman is empty, unnatural and powerless'.³⁴

Development of the genre after 1950

The traditional boys' boarding-school tale has, indeed, long disappeared. Frank Eyre has pointed out that 'by 1950 there were few boys' boarding-school stories of the old pattern still in print'³⁵ and, with notable exceptions like William Mayne's *Choir School*³⁶ and the *Jennings* books,³⁷ this has remained true. A very few writers, like E. Hildick in his *Jim Starling* series (1958-60),³⁸ have tried to create a new type of story centred in a less elitist and more accessible context, but the force of myth has gone, and most modern male writers who choose to include school in their stories write about mixed day-schools. School-stories were replaced for boys by adventure tales, a significant development to which we will return later.

Girls' stories have followed quite a different pattern. Certainly, after the heyday of their popularity in the period between the two World Wars there was a decline, and the lowest point was reached in the 60s and 70s, but even in this period two separate strands are discernible.

On the one hand, new authors like Antonia Forest, Alice Lunt and Mary Harris were emerging, all in very different ways giving a fresh slant to the genre (Forest writes in the context of a very elitist boarding-school, Lunt and Harris use a mixture of home-life and the local Grammar or, more usually, Secondary Modern schools). None of these authors is particularly prolific: Lunt wrote three books between 1959-61, Harris five between 1958-66, and Forest's output comprises only four school-stories (there are other non-school books about her Marlow family), the first published in 1948 and the last in 1976.³⁹

There were also individual books like Rosemary Wells' *The Fog Comes on Little Pig Feet* and Jane Gardam's *Bilgewater*, both published in 1976 and both set in a conventional girls' boarding-school.

At the same time, some of the older authors were still being published despite the literary and philosophical climate which required 'realism' and 'relevance' in children's literature. Some of Angela Brazil's books were still appearing in Armada paperback editions, as were Enid Blyton's *St. Clare's* and *Malory Towers* series, and Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Chalet School*.

The 1980s saw the beginning of a period of radical change. It was still true that, when Helen McClelland completed the biography of Elinor Brent-Dyer in 1981, there was so little interest amongst publishers that she was forced to meet the cost of publication herself. It was, perhaps, partly this book, which showed many hundreds of fans that they were not alone in their enthusiasm, and partly changes in attitude towards the suitability of popular culture as a subject of study, which began the rehabilitation of the school-story. In the 1980s the traditional girls' school-story re-surfaced in the work of new authors, in Harriet Martyn's *Balcombe Hall* stories and in the prolific Anne Digby's *Trebizon* series and, more strangely, extensions of Enid Blyton's *Malory Towers* books were written, not in Britain, but in Germany. These follow the main character, Darrell Rivers, into adulthood (defined in terms of marriage and a family), and are not yet available in this country, though translations of French extensions of the *Famous Five* books are readily obtainable in bookshops.

At the same time the 'Jolly Hockeysticks' exhibition of school-story paraphernalia at the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood in 1984 was immensely popular, and Denise Deegan's *Daisy Pulls It Off* (a dramatic burlesque of the genre) won the Society of West End Theatre Award for the Comedy of the Year in 1983. In 1985, Radio Four broadcast a Storytime selection of schoolgirl fiction comprising stories by Angela Brazil, Elsie Oxenham, D.F.Bruce, Elinor Brent-Dyer and 'Hilda Richards', and this is significant, for the programme was aimed, not at children, but at adults.

In 1986, Helen McClelland's biography of Brent-Dyer was reprinted with revisions by Anchor Press (it is now in its second edition, published in 1996 by Bettany Press, set up

in 1994 by Rosemary Auchmuty and Juliet Gosling), and in 1989 Anchor asked McClelland to undertake the writing of *Elinor Brent-Dyer's Chalet School*, a large-format, lavishly-illustrated paperback.

The publication in 1992 of Rosemary Auchmuty's *World of Girls*, which is an extremely perceptive and serious study of the work of Brent-Dyer, Oxenham, Bruce and Blyton, was a watershed. Information of sorts existed previously, but in a very closeted form, accessible only to real aficionados through highly specialised magazines. There was *Friends of the Chalet School* for devotees of Elinor Brent-Dyer, the *Abbey Chronicle*, devoted to the work of Elsie Oxenham, and *Serendipity*, specialising in the books of Dorita Fairlie Bruce. *FOLLY* magazine has been published since 1991 and has been involved in very significant biographical research, producing background articles, for example, on E.M.Channon (Nos 13,14), Evelyn Smith and Constance White (No.16) and Joanna Lloyd (No. 19). Auchmuty, however, provided the first full-length published study which treated the books seriously, recognised their importance and took a theoretical approach to their analysis.

The publication of Auchmuty's book, and the growth of a fan club for adults, brought together a large number of enthusiasts, and the renaissance was given a focus by the centenary of Elinor Brent-Dyer's birth in 1994, an event which was marked by a series of commemorative events. Plaques to the author were unveiled in South Shields, in Hereford and in Pertisau-am-Achensee, there was a special weekend of celebrations attended by more than 160 Chalet enthusiasts in Hereford, and a comprehensive exhibition was staged at Edinburgh's Museum of Childhood. September saw a gathering in Guernsey, followed by a service of thanksgiving in Reigate and the blessing of a headstone for Brent-Dyer's grave, paid for by subscriptions from Chalet fans worldwide. The centenary year was rounded off in December with a conference in London at which Bettany Press's *The Chalet School Revisited*, a collection of essays on various aspects of the books, was launched, and a video of the centenary celebrations was shown.

At the same time, Armada commissioned from Helen McClelland *The Chalet School Companion*, published in 1994 to coincide with the centenary, and Bettany Press published in 1995 *Visitors for the Chalet School*. This is Helen McClelland's

reconstruction of a missing story in the series which aroused considerable media interest, being the subject of six radio interviews within ten days. In both 1992 and 1999, *Mastermind* contestants chose 'The Life and Chalet School Novels of Elinor Brent-Dyer' as their special subject, and there is a growing number of academic dissertations and theses in preparation. The Chalet School is now established on the Internet, and the latest excitement for fans has been the discovery, totally by chance, of an adult novel written by Brent-Dyer and serialised in the *Shields Daily Gazette*. This novel, *Jean of Storms*, which had lain undiscovered for sixty-five years, was published by Bettany Press in 1996.

In slightly more general terms, Auchmuty, in conjunction with Sue Sims, Hilary Clare and Robert Kirkpatrick, has been commissioned by Scholar Press to produce an Encyclopaedia of school-stories, both girls' and boys' (due to appear in April 2000), and a number of the better-known writers will appear in the new Dictionary of National Biography. Eva Löfgren published her study of archetypes and motifs in Dorita Fairlie Bruce's school-stories, *Schoolmates of the Long Ago* in 1993,⁴⁰ and, in 1998, Rosemary Auchmuty presented (and later published) a paper on the girls' school-story at a conference of the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature at the Roehampton Institute, London.⁴¹ This was accompanied by an article by Siv Jansson,⁴² who had also written on 'Ambivalence and the Construction of a "True Chalet School Girl" in Elinor Brent-Dyer's Chalet School Books' in *New Comparison* in Autumn 1995. Even in 1998, Auchmuty entitled her paper 'The school story : from Brazil to Bunty' as a protest against the overall title of the event (*School Stories : From Bunter to Buckeridge*), which, yet again, made girls' books invisible. Nevertheless, the very fact of Auchmuty's inclusion amongst the speakers illustrates that girls' school-stories have at long last attained academic respectability.

None of the above would be true if the appeal of school-stories were restricted to girls; the growing success story is a function of the phenomenon that the genre's popularity is at least as great amongst adult women as amongst the children for whom the texts were ostensibly written. Elinor Brent-Dyer is by no means the only author whose books sell well to adults; the same is true of Elsie Oxenham, whose first editions reach £500, and

Dorita Fairlie Bruce, together with a host of lesser-known writers like Ethel Talbot, Winifred Darch, Margaret Biggs and Nancy Breary. Brent-Dyer is, however, the only author to have quite such a cult following, as evidenced in the twin phenomena of the *Chalet Club*, which existed during her lifetime, and the much more recent adult fan clubs, *Friends of the Chalet School* and the *New Chalet Club*.

Fans and fan-clubs

The *Chalet Club* began as a publicity venture promoted by Thomas Collocott, a director of W&R Chambers and Elinor Brent-Dyer's principal editor, and Phyllis Peattie, one of his staff. Miss Brent-Dyer agreed to write two newsletters a year, a badge and membership card were designed, and the club was launched in May 1959. Obviously, the Club was meant primarily for children and, indeed, girls responded with unbridled enthusiasm. The somewhat harrassed Miss Peattie said of the newsletter due in February 1969, 'I am anxious to get it out to the members and stop their writing in most posts to know when it will be issued. Elinor's "little dears" can be the bane of my life at times!'⁴³ The Club grew within five years from an initial thirty-three members to just under four thousand, and ended only with Miss Brent-Dyer's death. 1963 saw the Chalet School's Jubilee, with special events including a party for Miss Brent-Dyer at the National Book League in London, an interview with Brian Redhead and Cliff Michelmore on the BBC's *Tonight* programme, an official tour of the Children's Book Exhibition at Olympia where she 'signed autographs until my hand was aching',⁴⁴ and a visit to the World Book Fair at Earls Court which had a similar effect. In 1967 William Collins purchased the rights to publish abridgements of the books in their Armada paperback series and, at this time when school stories were markedly unpopular, they sold 198,539 copies in the first six months.⁴⁵ Even in 1977 the publishers could say, 'We are receiving enquiries regularly for more Chalet titles in print. I believe we have five at present and one or two more to come soon. Can we not build this up further? It is the only girls' school series available that customers want.'⁴⁶ Titles still sell at the rate of 100,000 per year and the children's branch of Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford

stocked in August 1992 three shelves of Chalet books (far more space than that given to any other author of any type).

The publishers also discovered, rather to their surprise, that their customers were not only children. In 1968 they reported, 'we are getting an increasing amount of letters about the 'Chalet' books; quite a number of letters are from adults who are filling in the 'blanks' in their collections of yesteryears'.⁴⁷ This was doubtless true, but interest went much further. Helen McClelland, Elinor Brent-Dyer's biographer, notes in *Behind the Chalet School* that many of the devotees of the books did not encounter them until they were adults, and it is adults who continue to support a booming second-hand market.

Even more interesting evidence of the power of the books over adults is provided by the fan clubs, whose members are almost entirely adult women. *Friends of the Chalet School* began as the *Australian Friends of the Chalet School*, founded by Ann Mackie-Hunter with a newsletter in August 1989, and changed its name in December 1990 with the formation of an English branch; by 1994, FOCS had over a thousand adult members. The early bi-monthly newsletters of the club are an amalgam of literary criticism and sociological information, much of which is perceptive and valuable, and an acceptance of the books as 'history' and the characters as 'real' which verges on apparent arrested emotional development. A flavour is given in the newsletter for August 1991, as Lyn Ashlin reports on a visit to the Victoria branch of the club by Ann Mackie-Hunter:

'Saturday saw the gathering of the clan; and a brave sight it was. Augmented by several Abbey Club members [aficionados of Elsie Oxenham's books], we had fifteen at our meeting, with apologies from another four We all wore something with violet colouring - Meryll managed real violets ! - in tribute to Ann as the Violet Queen of the N.S.W. Abbey Club. And Mandy managed violet icing on her cakes - well done! Marcia's games really did make a good afternoon perfect, and 'Consequences' was hilarious Emily Braithwaite won the door prize, a copy of "EBD's Chalet School."

It is very difficult to take this seriously; indeed, it is almost in itself a parody of the genre, yet the participants are totally in earnest. British member Clarissa Cridland claims that 'from the age of nineteen the Chalet School books have been more important to me than any others' (October 1991) and Madelaine Smith, about to be married, writes, 'I am

trying to convince Andy that what I would really like as a wedding present is a rare copy of *The Second Chalet Book for Girls* which I saw advertised the other day, but I don't think he thinks it's a very romantic present. Ho, hum'.

Exactly what is going on here deserves analysis. The overt 'femininity' of the coy references to iced cakes and the overtones of the beauty queen syndrome (Elsie Oxenham's queens are an adaptation of May Queens rather than beauty queens, but the linguistic echoes are significant), the arch and exaggerated praise for the effort expended ('managed') on trivia, the liberally scattered exclamation-marks, the stress on children's games and prizes, combine to create an impression of immaturity, of adult women locked in an anachronistic world of fantasy. This is reinforced by Madelaine Smith's use of wry self-mockery to distance her desires from the 'real' world of heterosexual relationships and thus lessen their importance.

Parody can be used for attack, but also for defence, and I would suggest that these women are, even if unconsciously, using a mode of expression traditionally allowable to women writers to mask what is in fact a highly subversive activity - that of constructing their emotional lives around women and woman-centred fiction. For subversive the texts have always been. While the writers of boys' school-stories abandoned the genre for tales of action and adventure, women authors took the boarding-school, a place of safety and closure, always ideals of female destiny, and made it into a site of adventure, experience and opportunity. They took an initially male genre and revised it to write their own dreams and stories, a 're-vision' which provided a strong challenge to what Janice Raymond has termed 'heteroreality,' that is, a life-view which defines women only in relation to men and sees them as alone or even invisible without men.⁴⁸

A gradual acknowledgement of at least some of these points has been one factor which has precipitated change in the fan clubs. *Friends of the Chalet School* is now a journal rather than a club, and June 1995 saw the setting up of the *New Chalet Club*, whose President is Helen McClelland and which has introduced much more serious literary discussion of the texts by academically well-qualified contributors. NCC already (in March 1997) has almost six hundred members and has regular study days and workshops.

A new phenomenon is the publishing of continuations of the series written by fans.⁴⁹ Heather Paisley's *New Beginnings at the Chalet School* seems typical of the private writing extensions of many women, an activity which can be explained as an attempt to focus on and extend the elements in the originals which are particularly important to that individual, exploring one's own consciousness in the process. Much more complex is Merryn Williams' *The Chalet Girls Grow Up* which follows the Maynard triplets, who are about to leave school in the last Brent-Dyer book, into an adulthood characterised by divorce, affairs, suicide, abortion and drugs. This very well-written novel kills off the Sanitorium, most of the major characters of the series and even the Chalet School itself, and its mixture of edgy parody and deliberate destruction of the fantasy is undoubtedly gripping, but equally incomprehensible.

Claiming that the texts are worthy of serious study is not to say that they are radical documents. At least a few of the most ardent adult aficionados are men, and they are able to find in the books a lost world of moral certainty, as the outer surface is stereotypic. However, the authors, like all colonized people, have used a publically acceptable facade for their own private and dangerous vision, following the principle stated by Oxford sociologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener that 'muted groups must mediate their beliefs through the allowable forms of the dominant culture, while also existing in the wild'.⁵⁰

Even this is not an adequate description of what is happening within school-stories, for it is undeniable that few authors saw themselves as wild revolutionaries. On the contrary, they were without exception highly respectable and respected women who outwardly supported and reinforced the expectations of society in both their lives and their fiction, for the perceptions of femininity and female possibility actually articulated within the text are socially unexceptionable - as, of course, they had to be in order for the book to be published at all; Chris Weedon has reminded us that 'which texts are available, which remain in print, which are widely disseminated through education and publishing is not a neutral issue'.⁵¹

Therefore we need to develop a reading which 'analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself'⁵² - what it knows but cannot say, and to do this we need to look at the possibilities offered by literary and feminist theory.

Literary theories as applied to the texts

It is important first to accept that most feminists assume an integral relationship between theory and practice. Again Weedon expresses the concept clearly:

'Starting from the politics of the personal, in which women's subjectivities and experiences of everyday life become the site of the redefinition of patriarchal meaning and values and of resistance to them, feminism generates new theoretical perspectives from which the dominant can be criticized and new possibilities envisaged.'⁵³

School-stories illustrate graphically the truth of Weedon's contention that neither women's writing nor popular fiction comes within the bounds of 'literature'. They are not legitimated by the literary institutions and are not seen as modes of access to the truth about 'human nature'. However, this does not detract from their discursive power to transmit meanings and values.⁵⁴

The contention that these meanings and values are sometimes different from those specifically expressed by the author is made possible, of course, by an acceptance of a number of literary insights which have together refuted language as a transparent tool for expressing facts, and have established every act of reading as a new production of meaning.

Saussurean linguistics has approached language from a descriptive rather than a prescriptive basis, and has questioned the very concept of 'literature'. Value does not inhere in texts but is conferred upon them by 'contexts of situation'; therefore the distinction between 'literature and 'non-literature' is meaningless; there is merely writing ('écriture'), some of which gets called literature by people whose interests it satisfies. For words are not immutable expressions of essential truth, but signs which are arbitrarily determined by a particular culture - 'C'est parce que le signe est arbitraire qu'il ne connaît d'autre loi que celle de la tradition, et c'est parce qu'il se fonde sur la

tradition qu'il peut être arbitraire'⁵⁵- and this allows attention to be given to marginal and sub-literary forms.

Saussure identified, too, the notion of 'différance' (that the meaning of a sound is defined by its difference from other sounds) - 'ce qui importe dans le mot, ce n'est pas le son lui-même, mais les différences phoniques qui permettent de distinguer ce mot de tous les autres, car ce sont elles qui portent la signification'⁵⁶ - but the idea was developed by Derrida, who used the concepts of *différance* and *deferral* to consolidate (though perhaps that is the wrong verb for an idea whose essence is fluidity) the predication that there is never a possibility of attaining a final meaning in language. A text can therefore be read deconstructively, with the realisation that its discourse is aporetic, that is, relentlessly indeterminate, with no final 'truth' at which the critic can arrive. Indeed, the indeterminacy affects the critic as much as the text, for we cannot take up a neutral or objective position from which to make a judgement or to settle the meaning of the text. 'We, too, as speaking subjects, are caught up in the interminable weaving, unweaving and reweaving of the fabric of discourse.'⁵⁷

Of course if this argument is followed to its logical conclusion, the critic is prevented from making any judgement whatsoever, and is reduced to silence, all notions of knowledge, objectivity, identity and historical truth having been eroded, and this is scarcely helpful. What *is* useful is the destruction of the myth of objectivity in literary criticism, and the possibility of using the techniques of deconstruction for political purposes as a way of exposing and undermining the hierarchies hidden in the repressive discourse of much traditional criticism.

Reader-response theory, which treats the text as the site of an authentic consciousness and the act of reading as a coming together of two consciousnesses, the writer's and the reader's, also helps us distinguish between the biographical author and the consciousness of the text itself. Relevant, too, is the structuralist assumption that all stories can be reduced to certain essential narrative structures, and in particular the description of the links in the chain of narration from the actual author through the implied author and the narrator to the narratee, the implied reader and the actual reader.

The use of this, again in relation to Elinor Brent-Dyer's texts, provides some fascinating insights. As a brief example, and one which will be expanded later, there is a convention within the texts for the implied reader to be older than the actual reader, and than the characters in the story. The reader is given information (for example, about forthcoming births) which is withheld from the fictional characters on account of their age, and raises interesting questions of author-identification, and of whom the texts were being written for.

I shall use all the above concepts to explore the sub-texts of the books in search of alternative role-models and life-views for women and girls - the search for the liberating image.

Feminist theories as applied to the texts

An obvious difficulty in using these methodologies in a feminist analysis is that all the above theories were developed by men working within a patriarchal structure, and this fact alone makes some feminist theorists consider them unusable.

French theory, for example (which, as formulated by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, is much less political than Anglo-American theory), has suggested that language itself, codified in Lacan's phallo-centric ideology as the Word of the Father, cannot be used by women without profound alienation. They advocate a return to a pre-oedipal babble, a pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic space integrally connected to women's physical and sexual natures, as the only true form of women's writing.⁵⁸ The theory is expanded by Cixous and Kristeva into a form of feminine writing which is non-gendered and as applicable to men as to women, but this would be rejected by more political writers like the American Mary Daly,⁵⁹ whose attempts at redefining the religious experience of women are expressed in a total redefining also of existing words to establish a new meaning.

Interesting as the above theories are, it can be argued that they are fundamentally essentialist (and, if writing is orgasmic, does that not imply loss of the speaking and autonomous subject?). Toril Moi has pointed out, in discussing the work of Hélène

Cixous, that she is in danger of playing directly into the hands of the very patriarchal ideology she denounces by rejecting rationality and emphasising the emotional, intuitive and imaginative aspect of woman; patriarchy has always been glad to allow women those characteristics, it is reason which has been guarded as a male preserve.⁶⁰ The essentialist nature of theories of feminine language is clearly demonstrated in Leonard Shlain's *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess : Male Words and Female Images* (1998). Shlain is sympathetic towards women and is writing, indeed, to analyse the 'curse' of literacy in its contribution to the oppression of women. He accepts, however, that there is a profound difference between 'feminine' and 'masculine' modes of thought, proposing that 'a holistic, simultaneous, synthetic and concrete view of the world are (sic) the essential characteristics of a feminine outlook; linear, sequential, reductionist and abstract thinking defines the masculine'.⁶¹ There is no attempt to define the feminine and the masculine in terms of actual gender, and Shlain makes it very clear that he is using the words in a 'transcendent' sense and that 'every human is a blend of these two principles'.⁶² Nevertheless, the use of the term 'feminine' coalesces with the concept of femaleness as Shlain traces the disappearance of goddesses and priestesses from Western religions and links this with the rise of literacy. He uses a neuroanatomical hypothesis to suggest that the acts of reading and writing strengthen the neural pathways of the left side of the brain which (arguably) controls logic, analysis - and language.

The history of scientific 'knowledge' teaches us to be very wary of constituting gender differences according to current theories of biology; they have been proved wrong far too often in the past. In the light of these attempts to explain difference, however, it is interesting to see that language is another area where school stories, while appearing to support the status quo, are deeply subversive. The surface of the text suggests that the language used by girls and women must reflect their cultural image and be 'ladylike', thus trapping their modes of expression into those socially acceptable as feminine. Even the tone of voice is regulated; Shakespeare's description of Cordelia, 'her voice was ever soft, gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman', is quoted with approval by, for example, Elinor Brent-Dyer⁶³, and the Headmistress of the school featured in Ethel Talbot's *Patricia, Prefect* warns her girls that 'there should be no noticeable difference in

the intonation of any one girl'.⁶⁴ Both in society and in the texts, girls were berated for giving rise to unsuitable, boylike behaviour such as whistling, slamming doors and, paramountly, using slang. Brent-Dyer's girls are fined and many others are castigated for their use of language, but again the apparent authorial view deserves examination. In order for punishments to be applied, the language has to exist, so what is actually happening is that the reader is being given the opportunity to extend her perception of what suitable language can be, and so widen her own means of expression. One of the characteristics of Angela Brazil's writing is her use of current slang expressions, and while this undoubtedly contributes to the dated feel of the books, it was a decided innovation in writing for girls. It is Elinor Brent-Dyer, with her great interest in language and her long writing life, who provides the fullest treatment of the subject and the greatest undermining of the cultural tradition. Again, we need to look below the surface of the text. The above-mentioned Shakespearian quotation, apparently perfect for reinforcing the construct, is seized upon by the girls in an orchestrated rebellion against damaging authority in the person of an unreasonable and unkind Matron. Their screeching, which they claim to have picked up from the loud-voiced woman, is one of the elements in the campaign which leads to her final dismissal. The rules of the Chalet School governing language are theoretically very strict. On the premise that the families of the European girls would not want their daughters to learn English slang, there is a comprehensive system of fines for the use of anything other than traditional vocabulary. However, not only do the girls actually use the expressions for which they are fined, the main character, Jo Bettany/Maynard, goes one better in creating her own epithets (such as 'Jumping Jehoshaphat' and 'Great Caesar's bathmat') which fulfil the function of providing picturesque language without the dating inseparable from the use of current slang. Even swearing is allowable - only a very mild 'damn' and only in the last book which Brent-Dyer wrote, but startling, nevertheless, in a school story.

A whole book is given over to the subject of language; Prunella Davidson, in *The Chalet School Does It Again* (1955) is sent to school partly to tame her into acceptable femininity in her use of language, and, in revenge, she startles her schoolfellows by

talking like 'the worst kind of French exercise'.⁶⁵ The case for informality in language is succinctly stated by Mary-Lou Trelawney:

'People must talk like their neighbours or else other folk will think there's something wrong with them. Oh, I don't say slang can't be rather mad, and some of it really is ugly. But on the other hand, a lot of it is frightfully expressive. Besides ... language, like everything else, goes on growing. If it doesn't, it becomes dead.'⁶⁶

Brent-Dyer goes further in her offering of alternatives. Whole stories are written in dialect or period language⁶⁷, and several characters in the Chalet School have strong regional or national accents (for example, Biddy O'Ryan, first a pupil and later a member of staff at the school, who becomes deeply Irish under any emotional stress). In addition, all members of the school have to become trilingual and the books are full of occasionally inaccurate but always stimulating snippets of French and German, including the very mixed efforts at communication of the girls themselves. Particularly in the light of the facts that language development is earlier in girls than in boys and that girls, for whatever reasons, consistently outperform boys in Modern Language learning, this is releasing girls into their intellectual inheritance and stressing that language is both important, exciting, and accessible to and in the control of girls.

There are still further implications to be discovered. In the inter-war period which saw the heyday of the girls' school-story, many of the rigidities of British society were breaking down, as, indeed, were its moral and religious codes, while philosophers questioned the concept of meaning itself. Old certainties and hierarchies were disappearing, our culture was becoming much less formal, and this was reflected in language. Early school-stories depict extremely formal modes of relating. In Louisa Gray's *Ada and Gerty* (1878), it is a great and sought-after privilege for the younger girls to call the older by their forenames, and in Lena Tyack's *The Girl Who Lost Things* (1924) 'it was only in moments of extreme feeling that Mrs. Wyatt called Miss Denison by her Christian name in term-time, though she had known her all her life and always did so in the holidays'.⁶⁸

Elinor Brent-Dyer's staff go through an interim period in the forties of calling one another by their surnames alone, but even in 1957 Kathy Ferrars is surprised at the

friendliness shown by her new colleagues, symbolised by their use of forenames (*The New Mistress at the Chalet School*). This was only one symptom of a society which was treating grammatical rules and social conventions of speech with less and less reverence, and, however true it might be that language is always changing, it can be a frightening process, for with language change comes the possibility of the collapse of meaning. A significant treatment of this occurs in *Peggy of the Chalet School* (1950) when Peggy, as Head Girl, is responsible for implementing an anti-slang crusade instigated by the staff, who are horrified at the girls' use of language. The Middles strike back by using Regency vernacular, and are punished by having their weekend punctuated by formal walks during which they may use no slang at all. They find it almost impossible to communicate as they cannot express themselves without using the forbidden phrases and 'it began to strike [Sybil] as never before how really outrageous their language must be when they found it so hard to express themselves in classic English'.⁶⁹ This transmutes one of society's constructs of femininity into a protest against the increasing collapse of traditional rules of language usage and makes women the guardians of meaning.

Ultimately the problem is one, not of language, but of power. Deborah Cameron has suggested that men do not control meaning at all. Instead, women choose to use modes of expression men can understand, because that is the best way of getting men to listen: 'it is not that women are unable to encode their experience, but that to do so is socially unproductive and politically inexpedient the problem is not one of language but one of power.'⁷⁰

Cixous' perception of ideology is of the total closure of a membrane, like an eyelid covering an eye, but this cannot be accepted, for, if it were true, nothing could ever change. We could never discover and analyse the ideology that surrounds us if it were entirely consistent, without any gaps, fissures or contradictions to allow us to perceive it in the first place. It is through the cracks in ideology that different awarenesses and perceptions are possible. I would suggest that school-stories are working in the fault-lines between ideologies, articulating one mode of being, but embodying quite another. The surface of the text appears to support the constructs of society, yet the emotional experience of reading the text indicates that the emphases in fact fall quite differently.

This is a very subtle and frequently unconscious process, but even a rudimentary analysis reveals clear distinctions between what the text says and what it does. Marriage, for example, is spoken of as the preferred future of almost everyone, but the strongest characters in the books are unmarried career women, and have to remain so to stay in the community at all. Given that marriage, as constructed by our society, has been the major cause of loss of selfhood and disempowerment for women, the presentation of a valid alternative is important, but it is demonstrated, never articulated.

The rest of the thesis analyses this sub-text and demonstrates how the different life-options present in the school-story widen these cracks in ideology and provide a means of escape, of liberation, for those whom the dominant thought-patterns of society do not fit.

- 1 George Orwell, *Collected Essays*, (London : Martin, Secker & Warburg, 1961), p.95. (first published 1948).
- 2 Published in 1857, it had run through five editions (11,000 copies) by November of the same year, and no fewer than fifty-two by 1982.
- 3 Isabel Quigly, *The Heirs of Tom Brown*, (Oxford:OUP,1982), p.276.
- 4 Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, *The Public School Phenomenon*, (London:Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p.88
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- 37 The *Jennings* books, written by Anthony Buckeridge, are themselves a phenomenon. They were published almost yearly by Collins from 1950 to 1973, an Armada paperback appeared in 1977, and the books resurfaced under the Macmillan imprint in 1991 and 1994. They are regarded by critics as some of the best school-stories ever written.
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Chapter Two: 'A Passion for Learning'

The Intellectual Woman : Education in the texts

Introduction

A brief consideration of the history of girls' education will help to set in context the liberating images provided by the school-story, for it was developments in this area which gradually released girls from restrictive societal constructs and made change possible. The process is a complicated one with no neat lines of chronological development, as education has itself been deeply affected by society's constructs of personhood and changes in perceptions of what a woman is and should be. The education of girls has developed along lines of class as well as gender. Lower-class girls were trained for service while those of the upper-class were polished to be ornaments of society, but both were subject to the domestic ideal which claimed that a woman's place was in the home and her function that of serving men. Any use of the intellect was seen as deeply threatening to this role, and women were denied access to education on the grounds of medical and theological theories which shored up and perpetuated societal constructs of femininity.

In the twentieth century, the very existence of girls' school-stories provides a challenge to these views; the books are, after all, about girls at school, with the assumption that this is a right and normal place for them to be. They are also inevitably about teachers, women who have chosen a life connected with learning. Those texts which treat the educative process seriously challenge the constructs on all levels, presenting intellectual work as exciting, interesting and fulfilling. They give the lie to theories of intellectual inferiority and incapacity for rational thought as girls prove their capacity to deal with 'boys' subjects' and to use their education to progress into a whole range of career paths which they embrace with passion. Education is not confined to isolated school subjects, but expands to inform the whole of life, and the books present as focalizers girls who love learning and women who are committed professionals and can provide an alternative construct of femininity. This progression is not trouble-free, and the fluctuating fortunes

of domestic science as a subject illustrate the continuing ambivalence towards the role of women, and society's uncertainties as to the purpose of education for girls.

Ultimately, the possibilities of the liberating image in this field are restricted by the stress in many books on entertainment, so that we have to look further and deeper, but there are authors who succeed in providing their readers with a fictional representation of an educative experience which in itself becomes that experience and opens for the reader different possibilities of being.

History of girls' education

In the nineteenth century, those girls who were educated at all were largely taught at home, with schools being regarded with grave suspicion. Middle-class girls, for whom waged work was seen as demeaning, were given a training in the social graces and polished to render them competitive in the marriage market. Working-class girls were trained for service and attended dame schools (small, private schools run by working-class women in their own homes), Sunday schools and charity schools. Only elementary schooling was available, and that only for a minority, until the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880.

Educational reform began in the 1840s, stimulated by a variety of factors, including the stress on equality of opportunity in the developing feminist movement and the fact that women outnumbered men in the population; therefore not all women could be expected to marry, and respectable employment had to be found for those who needed it. This ensured that change began, not with the girls themselves, but with their governesses; this was the only occupation considered respectable for middle-class women. With such a low standard of education for girls, there were no suitably trained and qualified teachers, either. Even Frances Buss became a pupil-teacher at the school she attended at the age of fourteen, and by the time she was sixteen she was left in sole charge for as long as a week during the Principal's absence.¹ When the Governesses' Benevolent Institution was set up in 1841 to 'afford assistance privately and delicately to ladies in temporary distress', the Honorary Secretary, the Rev. Laing, tried to open a

registry of teachers but was unable to inaugurate a qualifying examination because of 'the deplorable ignorance of the majority of the candidates'.²

In order to help the governesses, a group of professors of King's College started in 1847 a series of Lectures to Ladies as part of the university extension movement, and this resulted in the foundation in London in 1848 of both Queen's College and Bedford College, initially to train women as teachers. This was a step forward which paved the way for wider study, and special university-level examinations for women were provided in London in 1868, in Cambridge in 1869 and in Oxford in 1872; in 1873 the first three Girton pioneers took the Tripos by private arrangement with the examiners.

However, these growing opportunities were available to very few women, and it was not until Emily Davies convinced the Taunton Commission (a parliamentary commission set up to examine the state of education in the country between 1864-68) to look at education for girls as well as that for boys that real change began. The Commission demonstrated how educational endowments were being mishandled so that girls were deprived of secondary education, and criticised the total inadequacy of the provision for girls in the private schools. It also brought to public notice the work being done by the pioneering girls' schools of Cheltenham Ladies' College and the North London Collegiate School and created a climate which demanded change. In the private sector, the Endowed Schools Act of 1869 established funding for grammar schools for girls as well as for boys, and the first Education Act (Forster Act, 1870) established School Boards and introduced a national system of state schooling for (mainly working-class) children between five and ten. Attendance was made compulsory in 1880, but schools were still able to charge fees until 1890, when free schooling was introduced.

There were, as we have seen, one or two pioneering models for girls' academic education. The North London Collegiate School was founded by Frances Buss in 1850, and Cheltenham Ladies' College opened in 1854, acquiring Dorothea Beale as its second principal, and an important step forward came in 1871 and 1872 with the setting up by Maria Grey and Emily Shirreff of the National Union for Improving the Education of Women and the Girls' Public Day School Company respectively. The schools established by the GPDSC, amongst which were the High Schools at Oxford, Winchester, Durham

and St. Paul's Girls' School, were mainly fee-paying establishments which aimed to provide a sound, liberal and undenominational education. The turn of the century, too, saw the founding of many of the boarding schools which developed into the girls' public schools, and whose growth coincided with the heyday of girls' school-stories in the inter-war years. Cheltenham (1854), St. Leonards (1882), Sherbourne (1899), Wycombe Abbey (1896) and Benenden (1923) began life as limited companies, while Malvern Girls' College (1893) and Roedean (1885) started life as small private ventures which later changed to trust ownership. The Education Acts of 1902, 1918 and 1936 simplified the organization of state education by replacing the Boards with local education authorities and encouraged the development of secondary education, but it was not until the 1944 Butler Act that free, compulsory secondary education for all was established.

Access to higher education for women was extremely difficult. Even though Emily Davies began, as early as the 1860s, to turn her attention to getting girls to sit the Cambridge University Local Examinations on the same basis as boys, Cambridge University itself was the last institution to confer official degrees on women, which it did not do until 1948. Indeed, in 1998 the University gave retrospective qualifications to those women who were still alive who had earlier completed the courses and passed the examinations, but had not been afforded the certification. Suggestions that the University should apologise to these, by now very elderly, women were dismissed. Emily Davies insisted on her Hitchin (1869) and Girton (1873) College students taking the same examinations as men, while other pioneers such as Anne Jemima Clough (first principal of Newnham College, 1871) and Josephine Butler (president of the North of England Council for Promoting the Higher Education of Women) were more willing to compromise and accept special provision for women.

Education - the making of a good person

However, despite the growing access of girls and women to education over the past one hundred and fifty years, the picture remains complex because education in Britain has traditionally been less about imparting information than about forming people.

Perhaps this stems from the strong pastoral role eventually taken on by our boarding-school system and from the equally strong connection in Britain between church and state. Perhaps, too, it is the result of the powerful influence in the mid-nineteenth century of evangelical Christian beliefs which combined a pessimistic evaluation of human nature, which was 'born in sin and shapen in iniquity', with an equally fervent belief in the possibility of change and redemption. Whatever the reasons, it is indubitable that English schools accept moral responsibility for their pupils in a way foreign to most of the rest of Europe, where youngsters are given training in good citizenship rather than good personhood. Education in England has for long been specifically connected with morality. When Thomas Arnold became Headmaster of Rugby in 1828 he gave it as his aim first 'to develop sound religious and moral principles', secondly 'to develop gentlemanly conduct' and only thirdly 'to develop intellectual ability'.³ Manchester Grammar School was founded by Hugh Oldham 'for the promotion of godliness and good learning',⁴ and Lucy Soulsby, the Headmistress of Oxford High School for Girls claimed that 'a teacher is bound to feel constant moral responsibility for what she does and is ... English and Latin grammar are interesting if, and only if, the teacher cares supremely for what is more important than any grammar, the development of each child who learns from her'.⁵

This desire to achieve a 'good person' as the end product of the educational system has persisted and spread far beyond the public schools, becoming a part of our basic philosophy of education. Richard Gross, in his *British Secondary Education* (1965) quotes a Professor Jeffreys as saying, in the 1950s:

'Education is the nurture of personal growth, and is concerned not even chiefly with the communication of knowledge and the acquisition of skill, but with the formation of right attitudes - attitudes towards learning, towards work, towards life in general',⁶ and Gross, writing in 1965, gives it as his own opinion that 'even the richest achievements of schools are of doubtful advantage unless "right" men and women are emerging as a result of what is being done'.⁷

The concept of what constitutes a 'right' man or, particularly, woman, is constructed by and peculiar to each particular society, and society has frequently chosen to allow

children access only to that information which encodes and reinforces its own constructions of personhood. True education is a dangerous procedure; people who are encouraged to think cannot be kept in their place; therefore such training as they are given has to be in keeping with their perceived role (that is, their role as perceived by those in power over them whose interests are served by shaping their perceptions of themselves). This has been particularly true of the education of girls, where the opportunities offered have been influenced by considerations not only of class but also of women's role and function in life. These perceptions have been determined, again, by those in power rather than by themselves, but have always been perceived as being a function either of God or of nature itself, and therefore immutable. The functions assigned by society to women are well-summarised by Rousseau, the eighteenth-century French philosopher whose writings became very influential in educational thinking:

'Toute l'éducation des femmes doit être relative aux hommes. Leur plaire, leur être utiles, se faire aimer et honorer d'eux, les élever jeunes, les soigner grands, les conseiller, les consoler, leur rendre la vie agréable et douce; voila les devoirs de femmes dans tous les temps, et ce qu'on doit leur apprendre dès l'enfance.'⁸

This, in England, developed into the domestic ideal, the belief that woman's place was in the home and her function, according to class, was to service or embellish it as God and nature intended.

Education of working-class girls - to be useful

For working-class girls, the emphasis lay in being useful, and they were prepared for a life of service. The oldest girls' school in the country, the Red Maids' School at Bristol, now an independent 'public' school, was founded in 1634 as a charitable institution in accordance with the will of John Whitson so that working-class girls should be 'taught to read English and to sowe or do some other laudable work towards their maintainance'.⁹

Whitson's motives were high-minded and compassionate, springing from the death of his own little girls, and his realisation that even the meagre education provided at all for poor children concentrated almost entirely on boys. Even in this context, however, what

happened in reality was that the girls were trained for domestic service. The idea that this was their destination was firmly established by 1700 and remained almost unchallenged until the 1850s. Those who supported charity schools gave the children 'a carefully limited training which should fit them for menial services', and women in particular 'were virtually refused access to sources of knowledge which were external to the family'.¹⁰ Thus from its inception the education of working-class girls was a conditioning into powerlessness, and for a long time nothing changed.

The Factory Acts of 1833 and 1844 provided that children from eight to thirteen should attend school half-time, either in the morning or afternoon, and this was originally envisaged as a training for both boys and girls in basic literacy and numeracy. However, the domestic ideal distorted even this theory, as shown in the Newcastle Report of 1861 which commented on Bradford and Rochdale; it deplored the short period of teaching, and showed how girls' timetables could be dominated by sewing:

'The time, therefore, during which a short-timer is under effective instruction is very short indeed; short as it is, however, in the case of girls a large portion is abstracted for teaching sewing ... needlework takes up the whole afternoon, and the girls may be left for a whole month without even having a reading lesson.'¹¹

The domestic ideal remained constant, and the teaching of domestic subjects expanded rapidly through the 1880s and 1890s. The Code of 1875 made grants available to schools for scholars in the higher standards of the Board Schools who passed exams in two subjects called specific subjects. In 1878 the Code made domestic economy a *compulsory* specific subject for girls. Grants were awarded first for cookery (1882), then for laundry work (1890). By the early twentieth century, fears about social welfare led to pressure to introduce lessons in childcare into the curriculum; housewifery was introduced in 1897 and became a grant-earning subject in 1900. The 1902 Education Act replaced the old School Boards with local education authorities and opened the way for secondary schooling, but concepts of the appropriate education for girls did not change. In 1906 the Board of Education (then a new government department set up to oversee national education) suggested that science teaching for girls 'might be wholly replaced by an approved Scheme of Instruction in Practical Housewifery for girls over 15 years of

age',¹² and in 1923 the Hadow Committee on the 'Differentiation of the Curriculum for Boys and Girls Respectively in Secondary Schools' pointed out that in Leicestershire 'girls are allowed to take Botany instead of Physics and Needlework instead of Trigonometry' and stated that 'we do not think it desirable to attempt to divorce a girl's education from her home duties and home opportunities'.¹³

Both boys and girls were educated to earn a living and be useful citizens, but girls had also to be 'makers of homes', and the basic assumption of the Norwood Report of 1943 is that boys should be educated for the world of work as future supporters of families, while girls, the future wives and mothers, should be trained for the private world of home.¹⁴

Education of middle/upper-class girls - to be pleasing

Although the domestic ideal applied in different forms to all women and meant that they were all eventually trapped in the same construct, life was initially very different for the upper-middle/upper-class girl. On the one hand these were the girls who, given a sympathetic father and access to a good library or governess, could and did educate themselves to a sometimes amazingly high degree. On the other, it was the concept of *their* role which developed along the most damaging lines. The siting of work outside the home and the growth, from the mid-eighteenth century, of the idea of separate spheres, of the man as breadwinner and the woman as keeper of the hearth, has been too well documented to need reiteration. Women whose social standing made housework or even care of their own children taboo were thus left without any practical function at all but, in accordance with Rousseau's maxims, if they could not be useful, they could be pleasing. Their whole education, such as it was, was therefore directed at charming men, so that in 1864 Frances Buss was telling the Taunton commission, 'I think that such education as [girls] get is almost entirely showy and superficial; a little music, a little singing, a little French, a little ornamental work and nothing else',¹⁵ while Emily Davies could write, in 1866:

'The common sense of the world has long ago settled that men are to be pleased and women are to please. Accordingly women acquire an agreeable expertise at the piano and view the acquisition as a solemn duty.'¹⁶

The rise of the girls' High Schools and the public schools certainly changed this image and initially produced a male-based education with an emphasis on academic attainment and sport. Reaction to this, however, was not long in coming, and both philosophical and economic changes led to the widening interest in domestic science which is treated in more detail below.

The 1944 Education Act made secondary education not only available to, but compulsory for, all, with the intention of breaking down barriers to learning caused by class and income. There was, however, a strongly hierarchical intellectual structure, and the expectation was still that girls would be educated according to their perceived social function. Initially, at least, it was assumed that a Secondary Modern education would be most suitable for girls, including domestic training because 'knowledge of such subjects is a necessary equipment for all girls as potential makers of homes'. As sociologist Anne Marie Wolpe has said:

'In other words, although pupils in general were considered in a hierarchical structure in regard to their future position in stratification terms, female pupils are not even considered as people who have a position in any hierarchy except on the basis of what they might attain through their husbands' position in society.'¹⁷

This ideology made problematic the fact that girls achieved higher scores than boys in the 11-plus examination, but the 'problem' was solved by weighting the results differently so that girls were awarded fewer and boys more places in the prestigious grammar schools than their results merited.¹⁸

Far from developing with time, ideology appears to have gone backwards, for the 1959 Crowther Report moves to an essentialist rather than an empirical justification of policy in its statement that 'the incentive for girls to equip themselves for marriage and homemaking is genetic'. With this philosophy it is logical for them to assume that, particularly in the case of low-ability girls, 'her interest in dress, personal appearance

and problems of human relations should be given a central place in her education'.¹⁹ Even in 1963 the Newsom Report was strongly confirming the domestic role:

'We try to educate girls into becoming imitation men and as a result we are wasting and frustrating their qualities of womanhood at a great expense to the community...in addition to their needs as individuals our girls should be educated in terms of their main social function - which is to make for themselves, their children and their husbands a secure and suitable home and to be mothers.'²⁰

The effect of such assumptions on intelligent girls is summed up by Winifred Darch as she captures, in *Lower Fourth And Joan* (1930), the reaction of a poor but clever girl to the prospect of being forced into a domestic life. Joan is being interviewed by the committee in charge of a Trust Fund which might be used to send her to High School, but gentle, old-fashioned Miss Muffham is not sure if this would be the best thing for her:

"'Wouldn't it help [your mother] more quickly if we helped to give you a more....feminine career....if she could be trained in, let us say, dressmaking and perhaps hairdressing, she might in a few years' time make a very superior maid-companion or something of that sort."

Joan turned pale.

"I sew very badly," she said.'²¹

Problems of access to education

The problems of access which denied to middle and upper-class girls the educational opportunities which their brothers could take for granted were medical and theological theories of the place of women in the universe, and social constructs of femininity. The constructs were based on the theories, and the theories justified themselves in terms of the will of God and the laws of nature, and were thus very difficult to refute. These discourses are treated more fully in Chapters 5 (medical) and 6 (theological). For the moment, suffice it to say that women were regarded as being biologically weak and their theological position was in submission to men.

Medical constructs

When Mr. Stanton of the Taunton Commission (1864-68) stated that, although girls were still taught by memorising a string of words and made elementary mistakes in nearly every subject, yet he thought there was 'evidence to the effect that the essential capacity for learning is the same, or nearly the same, in both sexes',²² he was making a revolutionary pronouncement, for concepts of inequality of intellectual potential between boys and girls were deeply ingrained. As late as 1920 the Board of Education was solemnly averring that the female brain was smaller than the male, and therefore capable of less effort, and recommending that account should be taken of the fact that girls were more conscientious than boys and also more susceptible to nervous tension. They suggested shorter hours of work for girls, and the retention of specifically feminine interests (predictably, domestic science).²³

There was genuine concern that the female brain and constitution could not stand prolonged intellectual effort. Herbert Spencer assured his readers in 1861 that any learning risked 'excessive stimulation' to women's feeble mental parts, and was incalculably dangerous. The effects of 'brain-forcing' upon young women were diathesis (nervousness), chlorosis (anaemia), hysteria, stunted growth and excessive thinness. Overtaxing the brain 'produces...flat-chested girls', consequently those who 'survive their high-pressure education' can never bear 'a well-developed infant'. It was the scientists who claimed (backing up their assertions with post mortem reports) that the uterus of a learned woman shrank to the size of a pea.²⁴

Elizabeth Sewell, a teacher and novelist, wrote in 1865:

'The idea of making a boy's attainments the standard by which to measure a girl's is indeed obviously unfair ... Her health would break down under the effort ... she will probably develop some disease which ... will be an injury to her for life'.²⁵

'We should strongly advise you', wrote the editors of the *Girls' Own Paper* to a correspondent in the early 1880s, 'not to work up for the examination, as it would most probably ruin what little health you have'.²⁶

Theological constructs

Equally powerful were theological objections, and these had a long tradition. The early Catholic educator, Mary Ward (1585-1645), was imprisoned as a heretic²⁷ and Mary Wollstonecraft's influential *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) was fervently opposed by Evangelical writers concerned to defend 'the patriarchal tradition of canon law and to prescribe for women a distinct and subordinate role within the family'.²⁸ The religious objections to educated women saw them as stepping out of their divinely ordained role; the College for Women at Hitchin (Girton College) was referred to by clergymen as 'that *infidel* place'. The sisters of the Quaker Anna Lloyd received the news of her decision to join the college with 'How worldly! How shocking! How *unchristian!*' (my italics) and the project was felt by many to be impious and morally shocking, because it would distract women from home duties, giving them instead a life 'merely of self-indulgence and self-satisfaction, distracting her from the plain duties that lay before her'.²⁹ The fear that an educated woman would be tempted to ignore the home comforts of her menfolk was clearly stated by the Rev. Charles Lee, as he cried: 'Let the girls take their music and needlework, and the boys the mathematics and so forth. If these important subjects are neglected, we shall have the ladies made strong-minded women, instead of good sisters, good wives and in time good mothers.'³⁰ The strength of the construct is seen in the fact that even Dorothea Beale, with her powerful commitment to female education, genuinely believed that women were called by God to be subordinate to men: 'I desire to institute no comparison between the mental abilities of boys and girls, but simply to say what seems to be the right means of training girls so that they may best perform the subordinate part in the world to which I believe they have been called'.³¹ It is significant that one of the very few efficient and effective early schools for girls was the Mount School (founded in 1831), run by the Quakers, who have always believed in gender equality.

Constructs of femininity

The equation of education with loss of femininity was taken for granted and, again, supported by scientific evidence. In psychoanalytical theory, for example, the acquisition of learning of any sort was deeply connected with the loss of femininity. Karl Abraham, strongly supported by Freud, described feminists as women who sublimated their wish to be men by 'following masculine pursuits of an intellectual and professional nature',³² and Hélène Deutsch went even further, stating that 'all observations point to the fact that the intellectual woman is masculinized; in her, warm, intuitive knowledge has yielded to cold, unproductive thinking'.³³ The cause of lesbianism (which was seen as a malfunction) was an 'impoverished emotional life, resulting from an overgrowth of her intellect', and one can only assume a frightening degree of self-hatred in this intellectual woman for whom the prototype of the creature which she herself was is 'the sadistic witch riding on a broom'.

It is these widespread condemnations of the intellectual woman which are profoundly challenged in school-stories as the construct is either subverted or changed into an agent of empowerment.

Alternative constructs in the subtext - work as ideal

School-stories provide a powerful challenge to the negation of the value of the intellect, for fundamental to the narratives is the ever-increasing assumption that it is right and normal for a woman to use her brain. This was a liberating image, indeed, for women who were used to being perceived as immature, emotional creatures incapable of responding to male rationality.

Not only is the intellectual life right and normal, it is exciting and releasing. The importance of and love for learning which helped to give women different possibilities for their lives is graphically expressed by authors who tackle the definite and widespread disapproval of women concerning themselves with education, the feeling that, 'it's all

right for girls to play at learning...but not to take things in the *serious* way you've begun to do ... [we don't] approve of girls rivalling the things that *men* do!'³⁴

Helen Watson, for example, graphically expresses the frustrations of a clever girl. Peggy, visiting Cambridge for her Scholarship examination, cries passionately:

'Ah, how greatly men are to be envied in possession of those good things which come to them by right, while we girls have to struggle and fight for the things we want but cannot obtain.'³⁵

Her chaperone points out that girls have now (in 1911) far more opportunities than in the past, and Peggy's subsequent panegyric on the University is oddly moving in its implications of a deep and fervent love of learning itself:

'I can remember beautiful gardens, crocus-bordered lawns...sunlit windows, spacious rectories gay with flowers, cosy sitting-rooms, a stately library - everything that the heart of a girl can long for was there. And this, this was *ours*, the heritage of the girls of England - planned, devised, raised by generous benefactors, all for the uplifting of woman to her proper place in the scheme of creation. Truly the heritage has been long in coming, but what girl can deny that it is a goodly one to possess at last?'.³⁶

The romance did not, of course, last, and girls ceased to be awed at the prospects opening to them. What did not end in the literature, however, was the concept of academic work as something rewarding and fulfilling, and many fictional schoolgirls are made aware of this. The value of work is stressed in the character of Catherine Moorland in Joanna Lloyd's school series; for her, knowledge is an end in itself rather than a means. She has 'a passion for learning',³⁷ and when an aunt pays for her to go to school, rather than be haphazardly taught at home by her over-busy parents, 'the thought of spending four years in learning and studying ... seemed to her like entering Paradise'.³⁸

Catherine imagines school as a place where she will meet a community of girls all bent on the quest for knowledge and taught by experts whose sole occupation it is: 'How wonderful it would be to have people waiting to explain things to her ... She would learn all there was to know, she would win that golden key that should unlock every door'.³⁹

Joanna Lloyd's books are written with comic intent; Catherine, who is more than slightly eccentric, discovers that school is very different from her fantasies and that her school-fellows do not share her love of lessons. Nevertheless, she remains the main focalizer of the texts, and as such has a powerful influence on the reader's perceptions. Nor is her love for learning rejected. Although her friends tease her, they totally accept her, and an older girl points out to her that the pretence of rejecting learning is merely a fashion; that, given the amount of time that is spent on lessons, those who like them have more fun than those who do not, and that she should retain her perspective; 'don't get ragged out of liking lessons ...most people are interested in at least one subject, and a good many in quite a lot'.⁴⁰ Catherine eventually leaves school for Girton, her academic leanings validated within the text.

The joys of study are sometimes discovered by lazy girls who are forced by circumstances to work. In Ethel Talbot's *Jean's Two Schools* (1930), the value and excitement of intellectual activities is recognised when Jean, who has been expelled from her first school for wasting her time and causing everyone else to waste theirs, is forced to work to redeem herself, and exactly the same thing is true of Nancy Caird in Dorita Fairlie Bruce's *That Boarding-School Girl* (1925). Hard work does not come easily to either Jean or Nancy (though both are clever girls) but, when forced to work properly, they find it both interesting and valuable. In Bessie Marchant's *To Save Her School* (1930) a notorious 'slacker' is forced to work, but this time the motive is to save her school from dishonour. Junia overhears the staff discussing the fact that the prize money connected with a school scholarship comes from a doubtful source. It is rumoured that the founder of the scholarship built up his fortune by fraud, and if this is proved, the money cannot be offered. Junia determines to win the prize, which she does not financially need, so that the reputation of the school can be preserved but, having made this decision, she, too, finds work stimulating and its own reward.⁴¹

The same discovery is articulated more fully by Ted in Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Theodora And The Chalet School* (1959), as she discusses the improvement in her work with the Head:

"And what I want to know, Ted, is this. Is this just a flash in the pan ... or do you

mean to ... work steadily all the time?"

Ted gasped "I - why - I mean to go on working. I never have before," she added with innate honesty, "but now I've really got down to it, it's rather - well, fun."

"Yes, if you've never really enjoyed work before, I can imagine you would feel that way," the Head agreed.

"It's such a decent feeling when you've got your teeth into a really sticky problem and can worry it out for yourself," Ted said, startling herself by this confidence.

"I know. I'm glad you've discovered it for yourself."⁴²

Work taken for granted

Some authors, even the earliest, treat work with less reverence. In *At School and At Home or Scenes of Early Life*, a delightful book published in 1828, Amelia, enthused by an inspiring reading of Shakespeare by her Headmistress, cries, 'If it were possible I could ever reach the height Shakespeare has, I would study night and day - but as that is not possible, I will sleep of a night, and be contented with reading and admiring him at a humble distance',⁴³ while Angela Brazil depicts, in 1910, the survival tactics used by the girls in her *The Nicest Girl In The School*. Here Enid survives her History lesson by learning the beginning of the lesson by heart and looking intelligent and eager, and makes up appropriate 'quotes' to fill out an English essay:

'When I can't remember any facts I make up a line or two of appropriate poetry and put 'as the poet says'... Miss Lincoln said once she didn't recognise all my quotations, but she always gives me a high mark.'⁴⁴

This use of the work motif as a joke within the texts carries an implication of shared assumptions between author and reader which itself testifies to the acceptance of female academic aspirations as 'normal', and must be seen as subversive in these early days of the genre, when attitudes in society at large were, as we have seen, very different.

There is, too, even in the early texts, an analysis of the development of an educational system which was, inevitably, based on the existing structure for boys. Authors were worried, for example, about the effect on girls of the 'cramming' system of boys'

schools. As early as 1886, the Headmistress in L.T.Mead's *A World of Girls* tells her pupils:

'In these days... all girls are what is called highly educated. Girls and boys alike must take out diplomas and pass certain standards of excellence. The system is cramming from beginning to end. There is no time for reflection. In short, my dear girls, you swallow a great deal, but you do not digest your intellectual food.'⁴⁵

The same view is reflected forty years later in Mabel Marlowe's *Lucia's Second Term*, as the girls groan over their coming exams:

"'There's such a swallowing of knowledge - like pills,"

"Or chewing the cud - you don't *quite* swallow it -"

"You just keep it *handy* in case you happen to need it..."

"Some of it oozes into you and stays, and that's called Education."⁴⁶

The final proof of girls' intellectual equality was found in their ability to study subjects which had traditionally been available only to boys, but the power of the societal constructs of masculinity and femininity is again demonstrated in the change of perception over the centuries as to what these subjects were.

Boys' subjects - Science and Maths

Not surprisingly, the view of what constituted a boys' subject changed throughout the centuries in accordance with current concepts of what was important in the world. Patricia Phillips has shown in her study of women's scientific interests that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, education for men meant the classics, and science did not come into the picture. The philosopher Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) declared that 'Man came not into the World to be Astronomers, or Chymists, to spend their whole life at the end of a Telescope; or labouring at a Furnace, to deduce trifling consequences from their painful Observations'. For him man's most important task is coming to know himself. 'The finest, the most delightful and most necessary Knowledge is undoubtedly that of Ourselves.'⁴⁷

While women were excluded from classical education they had looked for areas in which study was permitted - and had found science. Science became a lady's subject. Mathematics, accountancy, astronomy, meteorology, physics, chemistry and geography all came to be suitable and popular subjects for women because they were seen as practical, rather like kitchen work. The poet and writer, Mary, Lady Chudleigh (1656-1710), promoted science as satisfying women's intellectual aspirations and advised women 'to endeavour to get an insight into the useful Parts of Learning, and to attend to Things rather than Words.'⁴⁸

With this background, the introduction of Science into the boys' schools was difficult. The first school lectures in the subject were pioneered at Rugby in 1740, but were thoroughly quenched during the Headship of Thomas Arnold (1828-42), himself a brilliant classicist who made the serious teaching of science almost impossible. The first regular science teacher was appointed in 1851, and the subject became compulsory in 1864. When John Percival introduced Science to Clifton College in 1862, it was looked down on as 'stinks,' and was not taught by graduates even at Oxbridge; Percival, however, used graduate teachers, and by 1877 the subject was being taught to 90% of the boys for up to ten periods per week, which was quite exceptional for the time.

When science became a serious matter, it was found to be both too difficult and too 'masculine' for girls' brains, but because of this ideological confusion, the timescale for the introduction of Maths and Science into girls' schools is unnervingly wide. In 1828 the modernity of the education at Miss Seymour's establishment in *At School And At Home* is shown by the fact that the girls study 'electricity and experimental philosophy',⁴⁹ but forty years later the Taunton Commission incredulously asked Miss Buss if she believed that women were capable of learning Mathematics, and reported with regard to Arithmetic that 'most teachers shared the parents' belief that girls had an innate incapacity for numbers, and a hatred against which it is almost useless, or perhaps not very important, to struggle'.⁵⁰

Those who believed such maxims had reckoned without the pioneer Heads of girls' education. When, in 1863, permission was obtained for girls to be admitted to University examinations (subject to the class-lists not being published), twenty-five girls from Miss

Buss's North London Collegiate School were amongst the ninety-one who sat the exams at six weeks' notice. Ten of the North London girls failed, and their weak point was Arithmetic. This weakness was a challenge which Miss Buss readily accepted, and in 1871 she was able to report that, out of fifty-three candidates, only two had failed in the subject. Miss Beale was no readier to countenance the suggestion of essential lack of ability ; at Cheltenham Ladies' College the only concession was that 'those who are but slightly pervious to mathematical ideas are allowed to drop Euclid',⁵¹ and Sophie Bryant, Miss Buss's successor at North London, and herself a brilliant mathematician, commented on her own early lessons:

'Girls did not believe much in Mathematics then and some made a good attempt at invincibility in their determination to stop thinking when the hour of Euclid or Algebra came round. But that did not last long; though it took time to build up the now familiar tradition that makes a North London girl rely on her intelligence and expect light from it even in the deepest gloom of ignorance and even stupidity.'⁵²

Light dawned more slowly elsewhere. As late as 1934 Margaret Laycock (*Form IV Does Its Bit*) has her girls consider Science 'a modern innovation and not altogether good form',⁵³ and in 1938 Maths is condemned as 'unladylike' in Dorothy Vicary's *Good For Gracie*.⁵⁴

This, however, is merely symptomatic of the confusion in the educational scene which developed very unevenly and is reflected in the wild mixture of qualifications which fictional teachers are given. In Mrs. Henry Clarke's *High School Girl* (1906),⁵⁵ Babs' Matriculation qualifies her well to teach in a local private school (private schools were not allowed to employ government-trained teachers), and in 1909 Angela Brazil's Miss Rowe returns as an assistant mistress after having left school for only one year (*The Nicest Girl In The School*). By 1925 the staff of Bessie Marchant's Bemworth High School are described as 'very scholarly women',⁵⁶ but Elinor Brent-Dyer's Madge Bettany, who founds the Chalet School in a book published in the same year, is totally unqualified (though the Headmistress in Brent-Dyer's first book, published three years earlier, is a very learned lady).⁵⁷ The later Heads of the Chalet School, Miss Annersley and Miss Wilson, are an M.A. and M.Sc. respectively, but while Miss Annersley

becomes Head in a book published as late as 1938, it is in the same year that Dorita Fairlie Bruce's Diana Stewart returns to Springdale to teach without any qualifications and merely to assuage a broken heart.⁵⁸

Education for independence - domestic science

Some of the tensions between the role and attitudes expected of women and the new and different possibilities gradually opening up for them are exemplified in attitudes to the teaching of domestic science. Here there is a deep ambivalence, and indeed a difference in philosophy within feminism as well. Some of the pioneers of education for girls, notably Emily Davies and Frances Buss, saw absolute academic equality as being inseparable from a curriculum and examinations which shared those of the boys, however inadequate they might be. Between the wars, however, and at the period which saw the heyday of the school-story, the 'new' feminists such as Eleanor Rathbone accepted as a reality of life the fact that women were responsible for domestic servicing, whether by doing it themselves or by supervising those who did. The corollary to this was a move to claim household arts as women's work, and to fight to raise their profile until they were rightly valued. School-stories also spanned an era when women were being asked to take on more domestic responsibilities than ever before, and there is great stress in the texts on the fact that these traditionally female occupations are important.

This had implications for class as well as gender. The Second World War finally destroyed a society where domestic tasks were undertaken by servants, but in the period between the wars it was still true that domestic servicing was the province of the working-class woman, while the role of the middle-class girl was to stay at home and be pleasing. In those inter-war years, housework was a lower-class occupation, and the stand which school-stories take against this can be seen as a movement towards solidarity and the lessening of class barriers between women. The ambivalence which cannot be avoided is the recognition that the time spent on domestic training in girls' schools had no equivalent in boys', so that girls were given less time to pursue the general curriculum; this is reflected in the dual burden still carried by women who still bear

major responsibility for the functioning of the home, while following demanding professional careers. The perception of housework as being not only what women do but what women are, a sort of coalescence of function and essence, is also perpetuated in the problematic responses of modern feminists to the issue of women employing other women to do domestic work. It is still somehow seen as an avoidance of personal responsibility and an exploitation of someone else - domestic work cannot be perceived as a job like any other, with the same rights to proper conditions and wages. (See, for example, a series of articles in *Trouble and Strife* no. 36.)

All this is reflected in the texts, and because domestic work is so integrally connected with essence as well as function, the theme is constant throughout all the decades as the same uncertainties resurface. The mother of Lorrie in Norah Mylrea's *Lorrie's First Term* (1940) has been 'well brought up', and hates the fact that her children have to help with the housework⁵⁹, and when Jill in *Girls of Greycourt School* hears that an old girl of the school is scrubbing floors in the ATS, 'a lump rose in Jill's throat at the thought of autocratic Catherine doing scrubbing work'.⁶⁰ Elinor Brent-Dyer's Lorna (*Lorna At Wynyards* 1947) goes to live for a time with her aunt and cousin; she is horrified at being expected to help lay the table, but, on being confronted with the washing-up, Lorna 'nearly rebelled outright...the glass and silver were none too well dried that day. Lorna was totally unaccustomed to such work, and hated the bare idea of it'.⁶¹

The course of domestic science teaching, caught between these two ideals, was very uneven. In 1911 the Girls' Public Day School Trust was claiming that 'a few girls who are backward in intellectual work learn cookery',⁶² and in many Grammar Schools of a much later date, Latin in the 'A' stream was replaced by Cookery for the 'C' forms.⁶³ Christine Chaundler's *Technical Fifth* (1930) consists of a non-academic form despised by the rest because they are capable only of studying domestic science,⁶⁴ and the concept is almost burlesqued in Bessie Marchant's *To Save Her School* (1925), where the girls have to cook a meal and bath a baby as a public exam, watched by the whole school.

At the same time it was accepted that 'the ability to provide a comfortable, happy home for one's family is woman's own work',⁶⁵ and that this did not come instinctively, but

was a skill, and needed to be taught. As early as 1915 Alice Chesterton was defending in *Whittenbury College* (a Domestic Science college) the need to take such teaching seriously, firstly because it is important to have a harmonious home and it is the woman who is responsible for creating this, secondly because this home-making needs to be learned. Domesticity is a burden for the untrained, and the girls need to be taught 'how to keep house and yet be happy'.⁶⁶ A slightly different perspective is given by Angela Brazil's Miss Drummond, the headmistress in *A Fourth Form Friendship*, who avers (in 1911) that 'a cultivated brain ought surely to be able to grasp domestic economy better than an untrained one, and an educated woman who is really helpful is worth more than an ignorant one'. The words are familiar, but Miss Drummond's main reasons for domestic training are so that her girls will not set their maids impossible tasks and will be able to survive in the colonies. There is a touch of prophecy in her final comment that 'the most delicately nurtured lady must sometimes set to and be her own cook and laundress',⁶⁷ for in drastically altered social circumstances, the ability to perform domestic tasks efficiently became essential for any woman who wished to live independently.

The above point is crucial, for the serious teaching of domestic science to upper- and middle-class girls can be seen as an innovation which helped them towards independence; as we have seen, the education of the working-class had been based on the subject, but it had been ignored for girls who had never been near a kitchen sink. Domestic Science is introduced into the Chalet School in 1932 because of the staff's horror at the inability of the girls to do basic household chores at a guide camp⁶⁸ and, reading contemporary accounts of school-life, it becomes clear that very few girls and women of the class for which the books were written even did as much as making their own beds. The 1984 School Magazine of the Red Maids' School at Bristol, in a review of the history of the school for its three hundred and fiftieth anniversary, recalls Miss Naylor, the First Form Mistress in the years between the wars: 'One night her water bottle burst. She could not remake her bed. She did not know how, never having had to do it in her life before'. This is nothing to do with servicing others, but everything to do with being able, in the most basic way, to look after oneself. Elinor Brent- Dyer is very

firm about the need for education to cover every aspect of life. Every girl should know how to run a house even if she will not have to do so and, significantly, even Princess Elisaveta gives thanks in adulthood for the training which has enabled her to cope with the greatly changed circumstances of her life - again, it has empowered her and made her able to be independent.

Domestic Science remains an extremely ambivalent area. The attempts to give it real value never succeeded, as it was still regarded as 'women's work,' yet in its effect on the upper-class girl it can be seen part of the movement towards self-determination and independence. Women might justifiably object at being always required to look after others, but they ought at least to be capable of looking after themselves.

Career developments

The full achievement of autonomy is impossible without economic independence, and further empowerment is gained in the opening up to girls of career opportunities. Once again their choice has been dictated by what society will allow them to do, and survival has often meant outward conformity; in Angela Brazil's *School At The Turrets* (1935) the girls produce essays on their future careers, 'a short account *not* always entirely on what she really wanted to be, but on what she thought Miss Martin expected her to want to be'.⁶⁹ The fact that this response is recognised and used self-consciously in itself exposes the subverting image beneath the outward submission to authority and paves the way for change.

Elinor Brent-Dyer's extremely long writing life illustrates the development of career prospects for girls particularly well. In 1927, Jo Bettany is seriously considering becoming a lady-in-waiting to Princess Elisaveta as an alternative to staying home and helping her sister look after her children, and even Jo's eventual career as an author is a home-based activity. There are, even at this early date, some alternatives. In *Princess of the Chalet School*, published in 1927, Juliet Carrick is preparing to take a science degree at the University of London,⁷⁰ and in 1941 (*The Chalet School Goes To It*) the girls discuss a whole range of future occupations from gardening through that of gym

mistress, nurse, musician, surgeon, student of embroidery, social service worker and student at Edinburgh University.⁷¹

Despite this, even in 1947 an article on careers in the *Chalet School Book for Girls*, although it claims that 'practically every profession and trade is open',⁷² concentrates on the service aspects of jobs (secretary, receptionist, house-keeper in a hotel), and describes posts of power as being available only to exceptional women. During the fifties and sixties, however, prospects bloomed. In *Bride Leads the Chalet School* (1953) we have the study of farming at Cirencester Agricultural College, and mission work involving a university degree followed by further training at a theological college, while Bride herself plans to read languages at Oxford and the Sorbonne, and Julie Lucy aims for Law.⁷³ In *The Chalet School and Barbara* (1954), Vi Lucy is interested in interior design,⁷⁴ *The Chalet School Does It Again* (1955) shows the Sixth Form being given specialist coaching for their university courses,⁷⁵ *Theodora and the Chalet School* (1959) speaks of Mary-Lou's career in archaeology,⁷⁶ and in *The Chalet School Triplets* (1963), Con is heading for journalism and Margot has her sights on becoming a doctor.⁷⁷ Other aspirations are for horticulture, curios and old china,⁷⁸ radiology,⁷⁹ designing textiles, secretarial work, cordon bleu cookery, acting, working in a kindergarten and studying illustrating and publishing at art school.⁸⁰

Almost more important than the careers themselves is the passion with which girls are allowed to espouse them. This is unsurprising for those like Margot and Tom who are following missionary vocations, but many girls speak of their future choice of career with total dedication, and Richenda is actually sent to the Chalet School as a punishment by her father who cannot understand that she has inherited his own passion for ceramics to the extent that she is unable to stop herself breaking his veto on touching the beautiful objects.⁸¹

Alternative theological constructs

The way in which school-stories challenge theological constructs of womanhood is profound enough to deserve detailed treatment; this is provided in Chapter 6.

Alternative constructs of femininity

The concept of the intellectual woman as emotionally atrophied and practically incompetent was (indeed, still is) deeply ingrained, and many authors tried hard to seek a balance between intellectualism and practical skills. Miss Buss claimed that 'the child is only half-educated, who does not educate herself by willing usefulness at home; it is a disgrace to have useless fingers and unreadiness of mind in household ways',⁸² and Elinor Brent-Dyer's Martha Rideout Foundation in *Leader In Spite Of Herself* (1956) wants to produce 'not a set of flighty feather-heads with not a thought beyond frills and flounces. And not a pack of blue-stockings with ink everywhere and no commonsense to boast of. I am training my girls to become sensible, thinking women'.⁸³

The point these women were trying to make was that the two are not incompatible, that it is possible to have intellect and yet be useful - to be clever and yet remain a woman in a society where to be a woman is to embrace the domestic ideal. Even as early as the above-mentioned Mrs. Henry Clarke's *High School Girl*, where clever Nell, the 'new woman', is portrayed as becoming hard and unsympathetic, the balance begins to emerge. It is interesting to note in passing that the author, Amy Clarke, always signed herself Mrs. Henry Clarke M.A., a signifier which simultaneously indicated both her femininity and her intellectualism. In the text, Nell, faced with the example of an intellectual but extremely undomesticated aunt, who lives in total chaos, begins to feel that the making of an orderly, pleasant home is important, and wants to do it well - and certainly one is given by these means control over one's environment.

The supposed loss of femininity caused by learning, which makes a clever woman unmarriedable is attacked by Helen Watson in *Peggy, Schoolgirl* (1911). Jackson, Peggy's older friend, thinks that 'women should be gentle and soft and domesticated - able to make pies and puddings and look after children'. He complains that education is unfeminine and spoils their charm, and his attitude towards marriage is summed up in a disgusted 'what man wants to have a paragon of learning for a wife'.⁸⁴

Jackson is an attractive character in this engaging and ironic book and he is not left trapped within his society's constructs for long. When he goes up to Cambridge himself, he speedily changes his mind and admits to Peggy, the eponymous heroine:

'Oh, that gets knocked out of a man up here ... when you begin to realise what girls really can do, what bricks they are, you see what absolute nonsense it is to bar the way ... I actually spoke, at the last Union Debate, in favour of degrees for women.'⁸⁵

Despite the patronising tone, this is real progress, the changing and challenging of society's assumptions. Women were not actually admitted to degrees at Cambridge until 1948 and the text mocks, and thus takes power over, the stupidity of such attitudes; Peggy's form-mistress 'was a college girl and had done awfully well in those examinations which women are too modest to take the credit of passing, and so go without all the show of cap and gown and degree which men love so much',⁸⁶ and Peggy teases Jackson unmercifully about his pretensions to intellectual superiority.

Peggy and her friends, however, are not dependent upon Jackson's approval for their self-validation. They beg their form-mistress, Miss Truelove, to explain to them why men dislike educated women and, after some cutting comments on the 'relics of barbarism still clinging to man', she sketches the loneliness of the clever woman who has become a threat and who inspires fear in both men and other women. Herself a woman of both charm and intelligence, Miss Truelove sums up the gist of her remarks with heartless logic:

'Moral - girls who wish to marry must not choose the path of learning which leads to the arid desert of solitude.'⁸⁷

It is indicative of fundamental changes in attitude that, despite such warnings, the girls unanimously decide that learning is vastly preferable to bothering about mere men.

Helen Watson achieves her aims by a humorous, ironic, but decidedly frontal attack. Hidden in the subtext of many other authors, however, are professional women who specifically reject a need to be admired and to be pleasing, and whose only priority is to do their job to the best of their ability. For these teachers, who provide role models which are decidedly unfeminine in terms of the traditional constructs, sheer professionalism is fulfilling and important and sympathy for those who scorn an easy

popularity but get on with the job is widespread. Miss Binks in W. Eastways' *Girls of Greycourt*, 'had never tried to be popular, but had always hit out hard at anything like slackness',⁸⁸ and thus wins respect and admiration, and she is only one of a whole race of brisk, bracing mistresses, stern but good-hearted, who are valued and applauded for their professional competence, for their sheer ability to make their girls work. Elinor Brent-Dyer has her 'sergeant- major' Miss Wilson, thoroughly liked and respected by the girls, who realise that 'she used to make me writhe ... but she also made you learn',⁸⁹ and even the much gentler Miss Annersley cares nothing about being popular: 'I'm not concerned with that side of the question ... we can put up with their dislike for a term or two. But they are *not* going to be allowed to go on as they have been doing. They'll work whether they like it or not.'⁹⁰

Miss Wilson is joined by Miss Duke in Sybil Owsley's *The School That Was Different*, who is 'a Tartar, but a just Tartar ... a form-mistress of whom any discerning schoolgirl might be proud'⁹¹; by Antonia Forest's Miss Cromwell with her 'amiable ferocity',⁹² and by many, many more to whom the description 'stern, humorous, quick-tempered and lovable'⁹³ could apply. These are far from being traditionally 'feminine' characteristics, but the fact that these women are presented so positively in the texts infinitely expands the possible concept of the feminine.

Work as fictional experience

The most powerful outworking of the liberating image in this context is found in those texts which provide a fictional experience of work which is fun and interesting. This is much more effective than merely being told that work is rewarding and pleasurable, and while it must be admitted that it is rare in school-stories, when it does occur it is very potent.

Early authors - authentic representation

The early authors provide faithful representations of contemporary school life for girls, a process which is extremely formal to modern eyes. In *Bessie At School*, written in the late nineteenth century, for example, a prize is won at the end of term by Gracie Howard, who has recited the greatest number of perfect lessons, and the girls sit in mark order in class.⁹⁴ Despite this, the feelings communicated by the texts are those of enjoyment and delight in learning. This is strongly evident in the above-mentioned *At School and At Home or Scenes in Early Life: A Tale for Young Ladies*, written by the anonymous Miss F**** and published in 1828.⁹⁵ This provides a fascinating account of the teaching of the time, as it is a straightforward recounting of the school day, the characters of the girls being skilfully built up almost in asides. Whole lessons are quoted in full, and the following Geography lesson encapsulates the ethos of its time and is quoted extensively to retain the atmosphere. The six girls who make up the school are showing their new Principal what they have learned; they choose Great Britain on which to expound, and their attempt is characterised by eagerness and enthusiasm. Amelia begins:

"Great Britain is bounded on the north by the Northern Ocean; on the south by the British Channel; on the west by the Atlantic Ocean, and on the east by the German Sea!"

"The United Kingdom," continued Charlotte Tempest, "consists of two large islands, Great Britain and Ireland, and various small ones; Great Britain is divided into England, Wales and Scotland; it is six hundred miles long and three hundred broad -"

"And contains thirteen millions of habitants," interrupted Jessie Fowler.'

Grace Jamieson here asks permission to repeat some poetry in praise of Britain, and the recitation goes on:

"Great Britain," continued Caroline Hunter, "is the mistress of the seas; and her wealth and commerce are unequalled, while the industry of her inhabitants, her constitution and her independence render her an object of admiration to all nations."

Despite the mixture of irrelevant facts and optimistic patriotism, there is a robust self-confidence which leads to an imperturbable poise as other nations are put in their place with equal aplomb:

"the Arabs in Judaea, Egypt and Barbary are rather tall; they lead a wandering life...and are nearly all robbers, yet their demeanour is extremely haughty; they are well-made and active and have a sympathising and gentle look," then, turning to Grace, [Caroline] said, "can you continue: I have forgotten what follows." "Nothing in their appearance," said Grace, "proclaims the savage; but when they speak, you hear a harsh and strongly aspirated language, and perceive long and beautiful white teeth, shaped like those of jackals and ounces." ⁹⁶

Content and method are alike beautifully simple - immutable generalisations learned by heart and repeated as accurately as possible. Yet these girls are, for their time, receiving an advanced education:

'they said, every morning, a lesson from Mangnall's questions, and in the afternoon they repeated (but without following the regular course of question) the substance of what they had learnt; by this means it became impressed on their memories, and they could all bear the strictest examination.'⁹⁷

Despite the disadvantages from a more modern perspective of a system which reduces education to the learning and repetition of unexplained and undigested facts, the girls are receiving information relating to the outside world, and this is already a move away from domesticity or social ornamentation. More importantly, the girls are shown enjoying learning and entering with delight into the acquisition of knowledge.

Even in this context, which takes girls' education very seriously, it is seen in relation to men, for Grace reaps the benefit of Miss Seymour's teaching when she is called upon to entertain the most eligible male guest at a dinner-dance. Charles 'began talking of foreign customs and manners. It was now that Grace felt the value of Miss Seymour's instructions, as there were very few countries but what she could give an accurate description of'.⁹⁸ It is not easy to envisage such a conversation, but at least education has empowered Grace so that she is able to enter into it from a position of equality, and

this was eventually to challenge and destroy the social preconceptions which had restricted women for so long.

Later authors - entertainment not instruction

The mirroring of reality in the early school texts disappeared almost completely in the 1920s and 1930s, for by this time the aim of children's literature was not to inform but to entertain, and authors were writing books where 'the lessons were remarkably few, though the accidents were many'.⁹⁹ Maude Forsey, in *Molly Hazeldene's Schooldays* (1924), concedes that 'the greater part of this history concerns the dormitory, the dining-room, the lanes and fields around the school, anything and everything in fact except what a school is supposed to concern, and that is lessons and the classroom'.¹⁰⁰ She also contends, however, that the classrooms have far less to do with our schooldays than people think. For her, the contact between pupils and the 'education for life' involved in the outworking of personal relationships is the most important function of a school - and this is a valid, if limited, point of view. For Forsey, good behaviour and enjoyable lessons are not the material of literature and it is only the dramatic or amusing classes which are worth recording, a common attitude epitomised in Margaret Lisle's *One Glorious Term* (1939), where almost the sole reference to work in the book is the bland statement that 'lessons were mostly perfunctory'.¹⁰¹

There are isolated, though evocative, mentions of work; there is the morning of the breaking-up trip in *Norah O'Flanigan, Prefect* when:

'Everyone felt that it didn't greatly matter how often A and B, skating round a pond at 8 and 10 miles an hour, met, especially on a boiling July morning, and nobody cared at all about the luckless grocer who bought 15lb of tea at 1s 9½ d a lb and sold it at a loss.... Miss Trevale herself seemed a little weary of sums about papering walls, and three men filling a pit, or two cyclists doing something foolish and confusing - all of it sounded very fatiguing at the end of the Summer Term, and there was a sense of relief when the bell sounded for recess.'¹⁰²

In 1968 a more modern view of mathematics is expressed when the older sister of Mary Harris's Jessica (*Jessica On Her Own*) is overseeing her homework, and is moved to protest:

"I suppose you know you haven't got a single one of your calculations right?"

"...they don't have to be 'right' : that's an old-fashioned word!"

"Granted. But the whole point is that they should be reasonable, and yours are just nonsense." ¹⁰³

A movement towards the concept of creative writing is touched upon in *Dodo's Schooldays* (1913) when Dodo wins a prize for writing a short story. The prizes are presented by a well-known authoress, and in her speech she deprecates the fact that, in school, writing gifts are usually 'exercised only in the production of dull compositions on stereotyped subjects'. A short story giving scope to the imagination is more valuable - though only as an 'occasional exercise'. ¹⁰⁴

Angela Brazil and Winifred Darch advocate modern methods of teaching History, and in Irene Smith's *The Imp At Westcombe*, Joy Everton is confused and upset because, although she can speak and read French, having been taught by her French-speaking mother, she cannot understand the grammar of the language; 'mother thought knowing the grammar didn't matter if I learned to speak French correctly with her ... [Kirstie] had heard of this method of learning a language before. A pleasant enough manner, indeed, but one not universally smiled upon by educational authorities'. ¹⁰⁵

Only one of the later school-story writers makes lessons themselves an integral part of her books, and that is Elinor Brent-Dyer. This is not surprising when one remembers that Brent-Dyer herself was a teacher of long and varied experience, which included running her own school in Hereford for a number of years, and was interested in both the content and method of teaching to the point where, as in so many other areas, the interest became integral to her writing. Her teachers are trained by the latest methods, and the theories of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel are briefly aired in the books, together with the thorny contemporary problems of subject setting, free learning, competitive incentives, comparative education and the advisability or otherwise of prize-giving

ceremonies. As the school is situated in Austria, the girls are expected to become trilingual, and have French, German and English days when nothing but the appropriate language may be spoken even in lesson-time - 'direct method' with a vengeance.

Many lessons are given in full, and, while the object is the development of incident or character, they inevitably demonstrate teaching method, and the actual content, from the cooking of fish to the geography of Australia, is extensively treated.

In *Chalet School And The Lintons* (1934), for example, we are given a step by step account of a cookery lesson dealing with the making of apple pies. The main point of the incident is revealed only when the pies are produced for the school to eat - it is then discovered that half of them are inedible, having been flavoured with garlic cloves rather than the more usual variety. The incident itself is amusing enough, but the point to note in this context is that, at the end of it, the reader knows *exactly* how to set about baking an apple pie.

Again in *New Mistress At The Chalet School* (1957), Kathy Ferrars, at the beginning of her teaching career and very conscious of her dignity as a member of staff, takes an instant dislike to the self-confident and ebullient Mary-Lou. Kathy is asked to take a Sixth Form Geography lesson while the senior mistress visits the dentist, and, in the ensuing lesson, three points emerge clearly. First, the discussion method of teaching senior classes is graphically illustrated; second, through the actual handling of the lesson, the conflict between Kathy and Mary-Lou is sharpened and confirmed; but third, and most important in our present context, the reader finishes the chapter knowing considerably more about Australia than when she began.

This is taking representation to another level, when a fictional account of an educative experience itself actually becomes that experience.

Elinor Brent-Dyer's classes are always authentic, both in the work done and in the attitude of the pupils, and she knows exactly what horrors the average schoolgirl is likely to perpetrate, particularly in the field of modern languages. This is not an element which can be appreciated by a child reader, but it can certainly be identified with by adults. Those who work in the same discipline share Mlle's horrified despair as she discovers that, after two lessons on the difference between 'voilà' and 'il y a', practically every

one of her pupils has used the wrong phrase; as Polly Heriot, unable to find 'shall be able' in her dictionary, sends in an exercise on 'pouvoir' with every verb left out ('it's not fair to give us things that aren't in the dictionary'); as Peggy Burnett forms the future tense of 'pouvoir' using the infinitive, and cheerfully begins, 'je pourrai'; as Emmy Hope produces a composition consisting almost entirely of made up words, featuring such gems as 'elle-coq' for 'hen' and 'mouton-chien' for 'sheepdog'¹⁰⁶ ... it is all only too accurate, and provides the possibility of identification for adult readers as well as children.

The minute details of the girls' prep are given,¹⁰⁷ and the school even uses standard textbooks - in *Two Sams at the Chalet School* (1967), Samaris is deflected into rescuing the school cat while on her way to bring Miss Wilmot's 'Godfrey and Martin' textbook from the staffroom.

Work as producing autonomous thought

The intellectual process is intensified and learning is related to the whole of life by the fact that Brent-Dyer is interested not only in method, but also in her pupils acquiring *depth* of knowledge and active, thinking minds - in becoming intelligent, autonomous people. There is great stress in the books on 'going deep,' by which Brent-Dyer implies a thinking behind events and a connecting up of both events and subjects. The Chalet School specialises in vast History charts showing parallel developments throughout Europe in historical events, literature and the arts, and refuses to compartmentalise subjects. Even the barrier between lessons and leisure is broken down when Miss Annersley sets her Sixth Form an essay on 'An Imaginary Journey To The Mountains Of The Moon,' a title which paralyses them until they realise that an account of these African mountains has occurred in a travel book which she has recommended for their leisure reading.¹⁰⁸ Thus the whole of life can be redeemed from triviality and given a purpose and a goal by the liberation of true education.

Conclusion

It was education which enabled women to escape from the dual images of domestic servant or ornament of society, and which gave them the possibility of their own narrative rather than a supporting role in someone else's story. Insofar as they take the actual educative process seriously, school texts reinforce this and provide liberating images, allowing the reader to identify with focalizers for whom academic pursuits are important, and with a community where they are valued. They subvert society's expectations and demands by providing a context where the life of the intellect is fulfilling and exciting and where the intellectual female is presented as a positive role-model, and emphasise gender equality in the pursuit of learning.

Relatively few authors had the knowledge, background or interest to achieve these ends through fictional educative experiences. As we have seen, school-stories, in common with the rest of children's literature, chose to entertain rather than to instruct, and it is in looking more closely at the plots, themes and focalizers of the texts that we can fully uncover the alternative universe offered to readers, and unpack the liberating images.

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Chapter Three: A Rattling Good Yarn

The Active Woman : Plot in the texts

Introduction

The divergent development of boys' and girls' fiction grew out of gender expectations deeply grounded in a society which classed boys as active and girls as passive, and saw that passivity as integrally related to a concept of 'femininity' which was itself a societal construct. As the Victorian novels with their stress on moral growth were replaced by tales of action and adventure, women writers used the opportunity to create active images for girls; these were contained within the school-story, partly because its domestic discourse made it an acceptable form for girls, partly because a single-sex environment released girls to take fully active roles and to be the primary movers in their own stories. The attempt was problematic because of the clash of discourses between school- and adventure-stories, and was eventually solved only by those authors who were capable of creating strongly credible characters with whom the reader could identify. When this was achieved, powerful images of active femininity were presented to the reader, liberating her from the constraints of the constructs of society.

The active woman as writer

These societal constructs of the active masculine and passive, submissive feminine cause problems for women with the act of writing itself, for if texts are sites of fantasy, they are also sites of power, and in taking to themselves authorial authority (even the words echo each other), in becoming the author who has the power of creation and rules her fictive world, women become active. The whole of women's fiction has been described as 'women's quests for identity'¹ and a 'protest against the available fiction of female becoming'.²

Women whose writing has any perceptible intellectual content have always been working against the grain of society, because such writing has traditionally been seen as

de-sexing; Joanna Russ, in *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, charts these responses from Rousseau to Sylvia Plath.

Rousseau : 'A female wit is ... always trying to make a man of herself.' p.31

Otto Weininger : 'intellectual women have a large proportion of maleness in their makeup.'

Freud : 'a capacity ... to carry on an intellectual profession may often be recognized as a sublimated modification of [the] repressed wish [for the longed-for penis]'

Karl Abraham : 'the repressed wish to be male ... is to be found in a sublimated form in masculine pursuits of an intellectual and professional character.'³

On Plath : 'there was only one way to validate the possession of an intellect, by proving that one was as ... "normal" as every-one else (for normal meant, of course, pretty and popular.)'⁴

The problem can be concealed, however, in writing for children, for this has never been considered an intellectual activity, or, as we saw in a previous chapter, one capable even of producing good literature; it was a moral activity rather than an intellectual one, and as such an acceptable part of the female role. What, however, is the author doing? Is she accepting a lesser genre and exercising typical female self-denial, or is she using an acceptable genre to subvert? Gilbert and Gubar have pointed out that 'every text can become a "sentence" or weapon in a kind of metaphorical germ warfare',⁵ but we are left with a contradiction. Children's stories, to be published, must encode and enforce society's desired standards and norms - and, like myths or fairy stories, they often state and enforce 'culture's sentences' with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts. It is certainly true that the surface of the text of school-stories does this. Women and girls are judged by male values and standards and pursue male-oriented goals. They are either trained to fit the female stereotype (that is, to become young ladies who will be fit to marry suitably) or allowed to be honorary men/boys, and certainly the authors would have claimed to have supported the norms. Both author and text speak from a position within ideology, but it is possible to perceive the text as palimpsest and to discern contrary levels of meaning beneath the surface design.

Constructs of femininity

The power of the surface design to deceive, and the strength and longevity of our society's gender expectations, are graphically illustrated in a modern school-story. Gene Kemp's *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler*,⁶ winner of the Carnegie Medal for 1977, tells of the excitements and misunderstandings in the last term at Junior School of Tyke and Tyke's backward but lovable friend, Danny. Tyke breezes through the term fighting the boys who make fun of Danny, putting a half-Nelson on a girl who has told tales, hauling sheep's bones out of a slimy pit, making a den in a deserted mill, bribing Danny with the gift of an old Action Man and daydreaming of being allowed to climb a difficult local rockfall, and it is not until the last few sentences of the book that the secret is revealed; 'Tyke' is an abbreviation of 'Theodora' - the hero is a girl. Revealed, too, are our society's preconceptions; the denouement is a genuine shock, and the book can be written on the assumption that it will be a shock, only if most readers have happily accepted the norms of male activity and have assumed, because of how she behaves, that Tyke is a boy.

By 1977 it was possible to question openly assumptions which had been accepted as creation norms fifty years earlier. In the same year, Bob Dixon published *Catching Them Young*, his already-mentioned study of sex, race, class and political ideas in children's fiction. This reveals how girls are shown as dependent, holding their mother's hand, and passive, standing at the bottom of the tree while their brother climbs it. Boys are allowed a wider range, with their father or their friends, they climb and play interesting and active games. Preconceptions are reinforced by clothing, which in turn strengthens the construct, for girls' clothes are more restricting than boys', and girls are not expected to get dirty in the same way. Boys are shown as confident and outgoing, taking charge and giving instructions - usually to their girl lieutenant, for, while girls are happy to read boys' stories and identify with the boy hero, boys find it very difficult to identify with even an active girl; it is always seen as a diminution of being. In summary: 'girls are placid docile and passive. Girls often just *are*. Boys *do* - they invent, plan and are shown as moving into the world. '⁷

This has implications for women, too, for the girls are being prepared to fit into their future role which is 'to have no autonomy to speak of, to act as adjuncts to their husbands and to live for and through husbands and children'.⁸ It even has ramifications for the role of the author, for not only are girls not supposed to have adventures, women are not supposed to write about them. Joanna Russ recalls a well-known and excellent writer and editor who introduced to her the collected works of an unknown author who was writing under a pseudonym saying:

'there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing ... that prevailing masculine quality ... that preoccupation with questions of courage, with absolute values, with the mysteries and passions of life and death as revealed by extreme physical tests.'

Russ records that 'In 1977 it was revealed that James Tiptree, Jnr., was the pen name of a sixty one-year-old retired biologist named Alice Sheldon - who had found a pseudonym she fancied on a jar of marmalade while shopping in the supermarket.'⁹

This is a complete reversal of society's assumptions, and the fact that the author is an older woman (with the double implication of physical frailty and loss of function in being past the age of childbearing and of being attractive to men) and that the name was discovered in so prosaic and so female a setting underlines the point.

Strong measures had, for generations, been taken in fiction on both sides of the Atlantic to ensure that girls conformed, for the authors were aiming for 'the more-or-less willing acceptance that lively girls must grow into sweet, submissive women',¹⁰ and all tomboys (i.e. girls who had adventures) had eventually to be tamed. In America Susan Coolidge's Katy Carr is punished for disobedience by being crippled for years (*What Katy Did* 1872), Louisa May Alcott's Jo March, despite her early assertion that 'I don't believe I shall ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up for any mortal man', is married off to a much older man and given a surrogate family of boys to keep her busy (*Little Women* 1868, *Jo's Boys* 1886). In England, Charlotte Yonge's Ethel May (*The Daisy Chain*, 1856) is firmly, if less spectacularly, re-routed from her inappropriate early desire for academic learning, for a writing career, for social reform ('If those high purposes should grow out into

eccentricities and unfeminineness, what a grievous pity it would be.') and L.T.Meade's strong-minded Maggie in *A Sweet Girl Graduate* (1886) is moulded into a more acquiescent personality by the virtuous Priscilla.

One function of children's literature was to legitimize these constructs:

'For boys there was the life of action on land and at sea : the world of Henty or Oliver Optic. For their sisters there was girls' literature it remained the function of girls' books to glamorize, to make more acceptable and less narrow, the circumscribed life of the virtuous girl and woman.'¹¹

Thus, when the nineteenth century boys' school-stories, which, like those for girls, concentrated on moral development - on 'being' - were superseded by the adventure tales of writers like Thomas Mayne Reid, R.M. Ballantyre, George Manville Fenn and G.A. Henty, they were beginning a process of the glorification of action as emblematic of 'true' masculinity which ended in the macho aggression deplored by George Orwell in 1939 when he pointed out with disgust that 'the American ideal, the 'he-man,' the 'tough guy,' the gorilla who puts everything right by socking everybody else on the jaw - now figures in a majority of boys' papers'.¹²

Claudia Nelson sees an even deeper significance in the abandonment of school-stories for boys in favour of adventure yarns. She argues very persuasively in *Boys Will Be Girls*¹³ that the values inculcated by the evangelical Christian writers of school tales in the late nineteenth century were precisely those which society has chosen to regard as being 'feminine,' and the move away from them was a deliberate rejection of 'feminine' values. In the universe of *Tom Brown* and *Eric*, masculine power is seen as a corrupting influence, and the virtues extolled are those of humility, self-sacrifice, unselfishness, purity of heart and devotion to duty. Self-discipline and repression of the flesh are an attempt to kill the masculine ego in a search for a spiritual anti-hierarchy in which the knowledge of one's own powerlessness in this world may be the best way of ensuring entry into the next. Nelson's thesis is very convincing, and she attributes the rejection of these ideals to the theories of the sexologists working at the turn of the century who equated lack of the traditional 'manly' characteristics with homosexuality, and terrified

both writers and readers into rejecting the premise implied by Orwell, that 'masculinity in its most exaggerated form is just beastliness'.¹⁴

The universe of the adventure tale was very consciously male; the books were written for boys and excluded girls almost entirely. Even the adventure stories of Elinor Brent-Dyer (the *Fardingales* and *Chudleigh Hold* books), which do include girls as part of the family, were advertised as adventure tales for boys and, while undoubtedly all sorts of adventure books were eagerly read by girls, they were regarded very much as interlopers in a masculine paradigm. The prevalent wisdom said that girls could not play active roles and take initiative, and, if they could, they should not, a point illustrated by Craig and Cadogan in their study of the development of the character of Clara Trevlyn from the *Magnet* to the *School Friend* magazine of the 20s and 30s. Clara, initially characterised as a tomboy, becomes progressively more active, but is constantly taken to task by her best friend, Marjorie Hazeldene, for her 'hoydenish' activities. When Clara wants to sail a boat on her own, Marjorie sees it as inappropriate for girls: 'They may be as strong as men, but they haven't the nerve.' Clara, furious at these strictures, hires a sailing boat and takes it out to sea. A storm blows up and the boat capsizes, whereupon Clara swims several miles to shore, on the way discovering and effecting the capture of a ring of smugglers. On her return to her friends she expects to be treated as a hero, but Marjorie's only response is: "That sort of thing's all right for boys ... but not for girls."¹⁵

Plots for girls - moral growth versus adventure

Even writers who strongly support possibilities of action and adventure for women see this as somehow abnormal. Carolyn Heilbrun has suggested that 'for women who wish to live a quest plot, some event must be invented to transform their lives ... from a conventional to an *eccentric* story',¹⁶(my italics) but this insistence on the importance of event would not have been understood by the early writers of school-stories (whether for boys or girls). For them the fact that 'girls *are*' is no obstacle to finding one's story, for it is being, rather than doing, that is important, and a text which consists entirely of

action is morally irresponsible. In the texts of L.T.Meade, for example, the events themselves are usually very trivial; in her *Beresford Prize* of 1890, the whole moral dilemma is triggered off by nothing more startling than a broken window - accident, not adventure.

The quest involved is an internal one, the struggles and crises of girls trying to find their own moral being, for Meade is operating in the Victorian evangelical tradition of introspection, of soul-searching, sin and redemption. In an era which accepted unquestioningly a didactic function in children's literature, these texts created a symbolic structure into which girls could fit themselves, and carried the possibility of empowerment in saying that girls and their inner lives not only mattered but were central, and that girls could become the subject of their own discourse. Despite the conventions of incident which concentrated on the motifs of false accusations, discredited nobility and the redemption of the erring 'villain' by the saintly heroine, often at the cost of her own life, there was emotional involvement and suspense in the moral struggle and catharsis in the final vindication. Ultimately, however, the books came to grief on the rocks of their own ideology. Because of the construct of femininity as submissive and self-sacrificing, the moral struggle tended strongly towards self-abnegation, often to the point of death, and the genre became very claustrophobic - woman enclosed and living within herself runs out of air. These books were very serious and lacking in humour (the loss of self is, indeed, a serious business), and this variation of the genre, like its heroines, died out.

By the 1920s and 30s the purpose of children's books in general had changed. Writing for children was no longer so overtly moralistic, entertainment became important, and, with it, active plot elements. Arthur Groom, in his *Writing For Children* published in 1929, describes the process as 'one glorious game', and goes on to suggest the best ways of playing:

'to put into words those beautiful daydreams of one's youth ... to get lost on the moors in a dense fog ... to win the 'Mile' with one's arm hanging at one's side after the school bully has fouled one on the bend; to struggle against the swift current in the river with the youngest girl in the school clinging around one's neck.'¹⁷

Writers of girls' school-stories seized upon these possibilities for, while girls usually have to take second place in mixed-gender adventure stories, the school context provides a site where expectations of passivity can be totally subverted. Girls are no longer punished for having adventures, they can show courage, strength and initiative, they can be the leaders and the doers, the rescuer not the rescued, the achiever not the spectator, they can have their own story, not a supporting role in that of someone else. At its best, the adventure is an enlarging ideal, and certainly an active one, and therefore, for girls, a form of discourse which can be both subversive and liberating. It was still true that girls could be foregrounded only when there was no male competition, and part of the reason for the longevity of the school story for girls has been that it is a totally female community where girls do not have to take second place. All the conventions of plot device were available to the authors, who revelled in fires, floods, ghosts, midnight feasts, feuds between individuals and schools, treasure-hunting, secret passages, girls trapped by the tide and caught in avalanches, girls triumphing on the sports field and excelling in (and even sometimes cheating at) exams. We are not concerned here with the plausibility of the above motifs, but with the liberating images which they opened for girls and women, for in all these plots it is girls who are questing, rescuing, solving puzzles, resolving conflicts, taking the initiative and being central to the world of the text, girls who are liberated into the carnivalesque that inverts acceptable ways of behaving.

The problem with adventure plots is that it is very easy for them to lose all credibility. Arthur Groom was no mere theorist, he was himself a writer of girls' school-stories, and the fact that they are ridiculous to the point of absurdity illustrates the fact that his precepts are particularly difficult to apply to the genre, for schools are not naturally places of adventure. In ordinary school-life, very little ever happens, and some manipulation of reality is needed if one is to be able to write at all. Jane Shaw's Susan discovers that 'hours and hours, days and days, weeks and weeks passed without anything exciting happening at all ... nothing but boring old lessons and prep',¹⁸ and Stanley Harris claims that 'no school novel ever yet written has been absolutely true to life and never could be and still be readable'.¹⁹ Dorothea Moore uses as a character in

The Only Daygirl a writer of school stories who claims to base her tales on actual schools, but admits to her unimpressed hostesses that she has to enliven reality a little:

'Miss Mersham ... told me that they had never had a single girl over the cliffs in all the history of the school, but that would be dull in a book, wouldn't it.'²⁰

Indeed, it is the very safety of the environment which makes school-stories an acceptable genre for girls. School is a place of safety and closure; it is also, in some form, totally familiar to every reader. Therefore the discourse of the school tale is required to take on aspects of the documentary, and can retain enough of the character of the domestic novel to be perceived as an appropriate form for girls. Within this secure, parent- and society-sanctioned school environment, the author can use the ideal to subvert, to present a context of adventure and experience in a world without the presence of the active male, where it is possible for the jealously guarded 'masculine' prerogative of action to be hijacked by girls and women. Margery Fisher emphasises the need in an adventure story for 'a hero, or more rarely, a heroine, of more than ordinary stature',²¹ and an appropriate blend of school and adventure elements can liberate girls into these roles.

An appropriate blend is not easy to achieve. The power of the use of adventure elements in a school story springs precisely from the incompatibility of the genres, and it is a delicate balance to negotiate, for school-tales are fundamentally different from adventure-tales. As Margery Fisher has pointed out, 'every type of fiction depends for its defining and acceptance on certain conventions which are, in effect, agreements between author and reader'.²² An adventure story is essentially open-ended and essentially fantasy; the author can create her own situation and anything can happen, the only constraint being that of consistency within the story itself. School-stories are, of course, fantasy, but school itself is real, and we have all been there (even if not to the same type of school), therefore the fictional construct must bear some relation to an organism which actually exists and which is totally familiar to every reader, for the school situation is above all else known, structured and defined. If adventure-story elements, which offer surprise rather than confirmation, and strangeness rather than familiarity, are introduced into a school-tale the result is, according to the bent of the author, either a

good adventure-story with the school totally fading into the background, or a school situation which becomes sensational to the point of farce. The school books of Bessie Marchant exemplify the first alternative, for while Marchant (working from the 1890s to the 1940s) produced innovative and vigorous adventure stories (she was called 'the girls' Henty'), she nowhere succeeds in creating a plausible school.²³ This, however, is preferable to the other option, which surfaces in the post-Groom era of the 1940s, culminates in the melodrama of the books of J. Radford-Evans and Rita Coatts (examples of whose work are quoted elsewhere), and is encapsulated in Renée Clarke's *Turbulent Term* (1948 - defined as 'a girls' school mystery and adventure story'). By the end of the term in question, five girls have been kidnapped; the pendant of a South American princess who is a pupil at the school has been stolen; the Headmistress has been attacked and injured and yet another pupil imprisoned, all at the instigation of the deputy Head and her estranged criminal husband, a catalogue of disaster summed up in the heroine's immortal line, 'Prisoner, here in the Head's own study at Ivytowers'.²⁴ The same note of farce is apparent from a glance at even the chapter headings of J. Radford-Evans' *Girls Will Be Girls* in which successive chapters are entitled: *A Flogging is Threatened; Excitement on the Roof; Drugged!; Ghosts!; Kidnapped!; A Fight for Life*.²⁵

Many authors recognised, resented and mocked in their own work this relegation of the genre to the realms of caricature. In Dorothea Moore's above-mentioned *The Only Daygirl*, (1923) A.J and Sadie are given the unwelcome task of acting as hostesses to a writer of girls' school-stories who is visiting the school. The girls hastily glance through those of the visitor's books which are in the school library, and find that the illustrations depict a blazing dormitory, with no-one but the heroine making any effort to rescue anyone; the heroine scrambling rapidly down a sheer cliff of terrific height, while a horrified and helpless Headmistress looks on from above and:

'The indefatigable heroine, again single-handed, rowing a cockleshell of a boat through a boiling sea to a nearly submerged rock, on which was a small beseeching figure with arms outstretched.'²⁶

A.J and Sadie rapidly realise that Miss Farraday does not really wish to see the school at all, she is much more interested in her own imaginings than in reality, and the girls

regale her with wild tales of their own invention and dismiss her with contempt - 'it wasn't the - the real school she wanted to know about; it was the school she thought school was'.²⁷ The difficulties of balancing the genres are illustrated, however, by the fact that, in *The New Prefect* (1921), Moore had herself caused her Petronella to avert a train disaster, quell a school rebellion, rescue a blind man from a bog at the risk of her own life and save miners trapped in a pitfall, all within the space of a few weeks.²⁸

The skill required to walk the tightrope of balancing different discourses, and the consequences of failure, are illustrated by Elinor Brent-Dyer, and this is particularly interesting as the work of an outstandingly good writer of school-stories who was trying an experiment. In *Redheads at the Chalet School* Brent-Dyer deliberately tried to introduce 'thriller' elements into a school-story, and in doing so produced what is surely the least credible book in the whole canon. *Redheads* occurs near the end of the mammoth series; by this time the reader is totally familiar with the school and with the Headmistress, Miss Annersley. Into the ordinary scene of the Head battling with her never-ending correspondence and sharing coffee and biscuits with her secretary comes the ordinary interruption of Flavia's father arriving for an interview. Then there is an abrupt change of discourse:

'The door shut behind him as Miss Annersley rose and she found herself facing a total stranger. For a moment she stared at him as he took the chair facing her. The next, she found herself looking straight into the barrel of a wicked little black revolver.'²⁹

The shock of the juxtaposition of these elements of the domestic and the dramatic jolts the reader completely out of her suspension of disbelief. Because of the very familiarity of the setting, the action is incredible, with the result that it is neither dramatic nor horrific, but borders on farce.

Brent-Dyer at least knew what she was trying to do, as evidenced in the reaction of Jo Maynard (the main character of the series, and a writer) to the eventual recital of the full story: "'I've never tried my hand at a thriller and here's a plot ready to my hand.'"

The police inspector protests at writing such a story for children, but the Head intervenes: "'I don't see why ... [Jo] couldn't manage a perfectly good thriller when she has the plot given to her.'"³⁰

The fact that Jo's creator could not do so says more about the genre in which she excelled than about her own abilities, for the domestic aspect of the school-story means that it has to operate basically as a novel of character.

It is failure to realise this which caused the production of so many school-stories which were, indeed, the rubbish which the critics claimed, for the search for action ousted the portrayal of moral growth and left merely a collection of not very credible incidents.

War as illustration of different use of plot motifs

The contrast between the use of a plot motif purely as action and as an agent of moral growth is well illustrated by the very few references to the First and Second World Wars in the books. This is a subject which is not easy to deal with in children's literature, and if war is to appear in children's books, it usually does so as an adventure, and is deeply romanticized. War is also the province of men. W.E. Johns, the centenary of whose birth was celebrated in 1993, was able to create a whole series of war tales with his immensely popular Biggles as hero, but, despite the *Worrals* books, which were never cultic in the same way, he is again creating a universe of masculine paradigm. This is recognised in a newspaper tribute:

'Johns argued that it was his close attention to detail and his liberal doses of action which secured Biggles his appeal. That, and no girls. "Biggles once rescued an Italian princess from the Nazis," Johns recalled. "All he did was rescue her. But there was uproar. 'You can count us out as readers,' wrote scores of outraged schoolboys, 'if Biggles is going soft.'"³¹

Angela Brazil, like most other authors, avoids much mention of the Second World War, despite living in heavily-bombed Coventry throughout the period, but the 1914-18 conflict figures in several books. With regard to the actual fighting (the active element, of which she naturally had no knowledge), she is idealistic to the point of absurdity, and gives it the conventional treatment of romanticized adventure; Winona's brother is 'just wild' to return to the trenches in *Luckiest Girl in the School*, (1916), and writes to her of the 'larks' he and his friends enjoy in the dugouts.³² Girls were supposed to be passive

sufferers of the conflict, engaging only in the quasi-domestic activities of rolling bandages and knitting for the troops, with even war news kept from them as much as possible, but this is questioned in the texts, as girls claim the right to be treated as responsible members of the community, and reject the restrictive protection of their elders. In Angela Brazil's *Secret of Border Castle* (1943), the girls subscribe to buy a radio for the school, but Miss Holt refuses her permission, 'thinking that so much war news was unsuitable for evacuated pupils',³³ and the aunt of Lavender Leigh in *Lavender Laughs at the Chalet School* (also 1943) tells Miss Wilson that she has never allowed Lavender to listen to war news, as she feels such horrors should be kept from children.³⁴

However, the girls in the care of the above-mentioned Miss Holt have a different perspective from hers and reject her assumption that they can be maintained in some sort of limbo of ignorance: 'Many of the girls had fathers, uncles, brothers and cousins in the forces, and they were very anxious to hear war news, and most indignant to find it was denied them.'³⁵

Elinor Brent-Dyer's Nell Wilson is no nearer accepting the desire of Lavender's aunt to shield her from unpleasant realities. She strongly makes the point that increasing maturity brings increasing responsibility, and that the teenage children are the ones who will decide whether such obscenities are allowed to occur again, but it is significant that she is willing to attribute this maturity and possibility of future influence to her young *female* pupils. She feels that they must learn something of war:

'so that they can build and work to prevent its ever happening again ... From the time they are old enough to understand what starvation and terrorism mean, our children must be taught about them so that they can see to it that *their* children shall not go through what so many of the children of the present day are going through.'³⁶

This approach changes the use of the war motif from adventure to an agent of moral and personal growth. It gives girls the opportunity and the responsibility to become fully adult, and leads them on from mere domestic participation in the action to a realisation of some of the realities of what war means, and, ultimately, to active participation in the consequences, if not in the fighting. Several authors make passing attempts at creating

active involvement; some of the strangers in Josephine Elder's *Strangers at the Farm School* (1940) are German Jewish refugees,³⁷ and E.L.Haverfield, in *Girls of St. Olave's* (1919) gives a picture of the terror of an air raid³⁸ (in marked contrast to Brent-Dyer's attempt in *The Chalet School Goes To It* (1941), where the brother of some former German pupils manages to drop a friendly and apologetic message onto the school grounds while on a bombing raid)³⁹. Olive Dougan's *Schoolgirls in Peril* (1944) has as its heroines two English girls trapped in Belgium where they are at boarding-school when the Germans invade. The school has to close, and the book follows the fortunes of the girls to their eventual escape to England, touching on the subjects of concentration camps, the Resistance, and the change in attitude of Tilda Weil, a German student who gradually realises that the brave new world is not what she thought it would be. Initially, Tilda is arrogant and patronising, proud of her family connections with prominent Nazis, but as the war progresses, 'Tilda, for the first time in her life, was beginning to wish she were not German. It was fine to belong to a conquering race, but it was not such fun to see the dislike, the fear, the reproach, in the eyes of the conquered'.⁴⁰ Eventually she helps a Resistance worker to effect Sally and Betty's escape, all her illusions shattered: 'I have done with Germany until she is altered. I can only hope now the war is lost by us. It is our only hope.'⁴¹

Elinor Brent-Dyer was in a rather different position from anyone else, having chosen to site her Chalet School in Austria. The school has to move after the Anschluss, but the immediate causes of the removal are significant, for, in *The Chalet School in Exile* (1940), the girls fall foul of the authorities as a result of trying to save a Jew who is being terrorised by a group of young Nazis. Action and morality are inextricably linked here, but the scenario is more subtle still; Herr Goldmann is the local jeweller, well-known to the school and to the reader, thanks to Jo Bettany's habit of breaking her watches. Even so, when a group of girls on a shopping expedition see him being chased by the boys it is Robin, who is young and unaware of the full nature of the danger, who dashes to his rescue, and the older girls and accompanying mistress become involved in trying to rescue her. Jo does her best to restrain her, and Miss Wilson is horrified when she sees the child becoming involved:

'Down the side street came an old man ... plainly running for his life ...stark terror was in his face, and already he was failing to distance his pursuers ..."What are they doing to him? The brutes! *Rob!* What are you after? Come back at once! Oh, my hat!"

For Robin ... was out in the square, making for the old man with all the speed she could.'

Jo and the other girls follow Robin, and Miss Wilson is 'aghast' to find them 'surrounding the terrified old man, Robin with her arms around him, 'while Jo was haranguing the pursuers with all the strength of her vocabulary, which was considerable'.⁴²

The incident is very powerful. Positive action is allied with physical courage and moral strength, giving a potent image of an ideal of behaviour with which we would all wish to identify. It is all the more striking, then, that the girls do not triumph. Instead of being convinced by their actions, the crowd turns on them, and they are ultimately 'frightened as they heard the low, bestial growl of an enraged populace'.⁴³ They are saved by a local priest who shows them a passage from the church out on to the hills near the school (a journey so stressful that Miss Wilson's hair turns white), but the Nazi youths follow Herr Goldmann to his home and kill both him and his wife, then return and take their revenge on Vater Johann, killing him, too. Several of Brent-Dyer's characters, like those of Olive Dougan, are sent to concentration camps. Dougan's girls are rescued; Brent-Dyer's die. This refusal of the easy 'happy ending' challenges the reader, encouraging moral growth and increasing maturity in her as well as in the characters with whom she is identifying, and the emotional truth of the incident is powerful enough to nullify the effects of the traditional plot device of the secret passage and the unlikely melodrama of the change to Miss Wilson's hair.

Plot in modern school-stories

It is interesting to follow the development in plot through to the 60s and 70s, for by then questions of realism in children's literature had assumed great importance, and there was almost a resurgence of the didactic element of earlier years with certainly a renewed

emphasis on being rather than doing and on moral growth rather than action. Very few school-stories were produced during the sixties and seventies, but those that were returned to the Victorian concentration on character and inner conflict, though this was expressed in terms of identity rather than morality. Rosemary Wells' Rachel (*The Fog Comes on Little Pig Feet*)⁴⁴ has to fight off the restrictive and conforming weight of her boarding-school to establish her own identity (and, in this case, her morality as well), and for Mary Harris and Jane Gardam's heroines, too, the search for identity is very much an internal process as they progress from uncertainty and self-deprecation to a realisation and acceptance of their individual worth. Even fewer books written at this time are set in boarding-schools (Wells' *The Fog* and Gardam's *Bilgewater* are exceptions)⁴⁵, and the fusion of home and school life made possible the use of modern plot conventions such as broken homes. There is, for example, Mary Harris's Seraphina (*Seraphina*)⁴⁶, who has to make her home with a very unsympathetic aunt after the death of the grandmother who has looked after her since her mother deserted her in babyhood, and Seraphina's friend, Stephanie, is also motherless and struggling to keep house for her vague and impractical father. This has the illusion of realism, yet is surely as far removed from the experience of most children as is being marooned on a sea-shore or caught up in an Alpine avalanche, and we are back in the realms of restriction, with girls who cannot have adventures trapped in the caring roles designed for them by their families. This is reinforced because there is no resolution of the problems facing Seraphina. Stephanie gets her happy ending (through a rather unconvincing *deus ex machina*) and an opportunity to train for a singing career, but for the heroine, the conflict between her own academic aspirations and her aunt's desire for cheap labour in her hairdresser's shop is left unresolved. There is no closure, either in the sense of an achieved, satisfying ending to the story or in a more general sense of final order and coherent significance.

Nevertheless, we care what happens to Seraphina and Stephanie, not because they are involved in a realistic situation, but because Harris has created convincing characters, and the reader believes in them, and the same is true of Kathleen Peyton's *Pennington* books. Although these are about a boys' day-school, they are significant because, while

most school-stories have been, as we have seen, dismissed by the critics as worthy of contempt, these have been lauded as realistic tales. However, if the elements of *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer*⁴⁷ are dissected, it is obvious that all the traditional elements of adventure plot are present. Although apparently an anti-hero, Pennington is basically a misunderstood hero, disadvantaged by his home background and by the prejudice of authority-figures. Despite this, he has the traditional ability to excel; his athletic prowess is considerable and he is (somewhat improbably under the circumstances) a brilliant pianist. Not only does he win the Music Festival, he does so after escaping from the shed where he has been locked up by his rival to prevent his entering. His playing is by chance overheard by an eminent professor who provides for his further training - and he even saves the life of his Music master when the latter has a heart attack. These traditional and predictable plot motifs were invisible to the critics because Peyton uses a working-class idiom in her books and that is an accepted icon of realism. Peyton herself was very aware of the way in which critics were being deceived in their responses by her choice of idiom; she speaks of being annoyed by one reviewer who assumed that the book was written for the type of person it was about - as she points out, 'people like Pennington don't read books anyway'.⁴⁸

Peyton's books are, indeed, effective, but again this is because Pennington as a character is completely credible. We believe in him and care about him, and are therefore prepared to suspend our disbelief because we want him to succeed. It is this emphasis on character rather than changes in idiom or the use of apparently modern plot devices which makes identification possible for the reader, yet even impressive modern authors leave us with a gap. Pennington is male, Seraphina is not allowed an adventure, and to gain a helpful balance we have to return to Elinor Brent-Dyer.

Plot superseded by character

In the *Chalet* series, Brent-Dyer has created, not only strongly credible characters, but a whole fictive world in which the reader fully believes, and which is governed by emotional and psychological responses we recognise and identify with, even if the actual

events are a little unusual. Because of this, she is able to reconcile the antithetical elements of school and adventure and also to fuse the strands of empowerment through action (doing) and moral growth (being). It is only in the series that she does this, and a comparison between texts is enlightening.

In two of her non-series books, *The New Housemistress*⁴⁹ and *A Thrilling Term at Janeways*,⁵⁰ the standard school/adventure format is used. In the former, the mistress in question saves the problem girl of the house from the inevitable fire and also, rather more unusually, rescues her from a high tree by means of a lasso, having previously saved the girls' adored younger brother from drowning; in *Janeways* there is the traditional hunt for treasure. The same motif recurs during the fifty-nine book *Chalet* series (in *Shocks for the Chalet School*),⁵¹ but here there is a significant difference. The treasure is entirely incidental to the book, having been found during the holidays by adults only marginally connected with the school, and the area concerned is immediately fenced off on the Headmistress's orders so that half the Middle School will *not* dash off treasure-hunting. Similar comparisons can be made with regard to the feud convention. This is another extremely common plot device, and the usual resolution of the conflict is for one protagonist to save the other from injury or death. Brent-Dyer uses exactly this situation in her first published book, *Gerry Goes to School*,⁵² when Gerry saves Jill from drowning, but a parallel situation in the context of the *Chalet* series is treated very differently. At first there are close similarities. In *Jane and the Chalet School*,⁵³ Jack Lambert and Jane hate each other on sight, but when, eventually, Jane does save Jack from injury, the only effect of the incident is to add guilt to Jack's continuing dislike of the other girl. Later in the book, Jane's parents are injured in a car crash but, although Jack pities her, her dislike is unabated and comes to an end only when she is helped to realise the foolishness and wrongness of her own feelings and motives. The difference in quality between the use of the same device arises from the fact that we have, in the *Chalet* series, characters with convincing relationships and reactions. Of course Brent-Dyer was by no means the only author to achieve this, yet the scope and extent of her series makes her a prime example of the ability to achieve reader identification and provides another reason why it is her books which women still want to read.

Conclusion

So we have seen that, in the nineteenth century, the constructs of femininity created by society were encoded and enforced in children's literature; boys were active, girls passive, boys were allowed to do, girls to be, and girls who had adventures were severely punished. When the emphasis in texts for children moved from teaching to entertainment, the retention of the domestic discourse of the school-story gave authors an acceptable framework in which to subvert the construct of feminine passivity within a context where it was unlikely to be challenged, or even noticed. As well as providing liberating images for the reader, this was also a liberation for the woman writer. There were problems, however, in balancing two different discourses and in uniting two very disparate genres, and, ultimately, the fusion could only be effective if the characters created were strong enough for deep identification. This principle holds true through changes in approach and expectation; whatever the superficial differences in idiom, the creation of a character with whom the reader can identify is central to the efficacy of the liberating image. Elinor Brent-Dyer succeeded supremely well in this, and the way in which she did so is the subject of the next chapter.

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- 2 Nancy Miller, 'Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing' (New York : Columbia University Press, 1988), in Carolyn Heilbrun, *writing a woman's life*, (London : The Women's Press Ltd, 1989), p.18
- 3 Joanna Russ, *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, (London : The Women's Press, 1984), p.35
- 4 *ibid.* p.16
- 5 Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land : The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century vol.1 The War of the Words*, (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1987), p.52
- 6 Gene Kemp, *The Turbulent Term of Tyke Tyler*, (London : Puffin Books, 1977)
- 7 Bob Dixon, *Catching Them Young vol.1 Sex, Race and Class in Children's Fiction*, (London : Pluto Press, 1977), p.2
- 8 Dixon, *op cit.* vol.2 *Political Ideas in Children's Fiction*, p.25
- 9 Joanna Russ, *How To Suppress Women's Writing*, p.44
- 10 John Rowe Townsend, *Written For Children : An Outline of English Language Children's Literature*, (Harmondsworth, Middx : Kestrel Books (Penguin), 1974), p.82. First published in 1965 by Garnet Miller).
- 11 *ibid.* p.76
- 12 George Orwell, 'Boys' Weeklies,' in *Collected Essays*, (London : Martin Secker and Warburg, 1961), p.109
- 13 Claudia Nelson, *Boys Will Be Girls : The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction 1857 - 1917*, (New Brunswick and London : Rutgers University Press, 1991)
- 14 Orwell, *Collected Essays*, p.40
- 15 Mary Cadogan and Patricia Craig, *You're A Brick, Angela!* (London : Gollancz, 1976), p.243
- 16 Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *writing a woman's life*, (London : The Women's Press, 1989), p.48
- 17 Arthur Groom, *Writing For Children*, (London : A&C Black, 1929), pp.37-39
- 18 Jane Shaw, *Susan at School*, (London and Glasgow : Collins, 1959), p.91
- 19 Stanley Harris, *The Master and His Boys*, (Winchester : Warren & Son Ltd, 1924), p.4
- 20 Dorothea Moore, *The Only Daygirl*, (London : Nisbet & Co. Ltd. 1923) p.109
- 21 Margery Fisher, *The Bright Face of Danger : An Exploration of the Adventure Story*, (London : Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), p.15
- 22 *ibid.* p.15
- 23 Bessie Marchant, *The Most Popular Girl in the School 1924, By Honour Bound 1925, To Save Her School 1926, Millicent Gwent, Schoolgirl 1926, The Two New Girls 1927*
- 24 Renee Clarke, *Turbulent Term*, (London : Gerald G. Swan, 1948) p.211
- 25 J. Radford-Evans, *Girls will Be Girls*, (Luton : Dragon Press Ltd, 1949)
- 26 Dorothea Moore, *The Only Daygirl*, p.102
- 27 *ibid.* p.120
- 28 Moore, *The New Prefect*, (London : Nisbet & Co. Ltd, 1921)
- 29 Brent-Dyer, *Redheads at the Chalet School*, (Edinburgh and London : W&R Chambers, 1964), p.161
- 30 *ibid.* p.179
- 31 *The Daily Telegraph*, 16th January, 1993
- 32 When writing of conditions in this country, however, Brazil is speaking from her own experience and is, understandably, far more realistic. She herself helped run a local creche for the children of munition workers, rolled bandages and organised concerts for wounded soldiers, and in *A Patriotic Schoolgirl* and *For the School Colours* (both published in 1918) she extols the importance of these activities and vigorously supports the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. In *Secret of the Border Castle* (1943) she writes convincingly of the boredom and inconvenience of evacuation when part of the school has to be moved to a safer area and become boarding.

- 33 Angela Brazil, *The Secret of the Border Castle* (London and Glasgow : Blackie & Son, 1943), p.68
- 34 Brent-Dyer, *Lavender Laughs at the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1943) p.28
- 35 ibid. p.48
- 36 Brent-Dyer, *Lavender Laughs*, p.27
- 37 Josephine Elder, *Strangers at the Farm School* (London and Glasgow : Collins, 1940)
- 38 E.L.Haverfield, *The Girls of St. Olave's*, (London and Glasgow : Collins Clear-Type Press, 1919), p.41ff, p.94ff
- 39 Brent-Dyer, *The Chalet School Goes To It*, Chambers 1941 p.198
- 40 Olive Dougan, *Schoolgirls in Peril*, (London and Glasgow : Blackie and Son, 1944), p.66
- 41 ibid. p.276
- 42 Brent-Dyer, *The Chalet School in Exile*, Chambers 1940, p.118
- 43 ibid. p.122
- 44 Rosemary Wells, *The Fog Comes on Little Pig Feet*, (London : André Deutsch, 1976)
- 45 Jane Gardam, *Bilgewater*, (London : Hamish Hamilton, 1976)
- 46 Mary K. Harris, *Seraphina*, (London : Faber and Faber, 1960)
- 47 Kathleen Peyton, *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer*, (Oxford : OUP, 1970)
- 48 Justin Wintle, Emma Fisher (eds), *Pied Pipers*, (London : Paddington Press Ltd.)
- 49 Elinor Brent-Dyer, *The New House Mistress*, (London, Edinburgh, New York, Toronto, Paris : Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1928)
- 50 Brent-Dyer, *A Thrilling Term at Janeways*, (London and Edinburgh : T. Nelson & Sons, 1927)
- 51 Brent-Dyer, *Shocks for the Chalet School*, (London and Edinburgh : W&R Chambers Ltd, 1952)
- 52 Brent-Dyer, *Gerry Goes to School*, (London and Edinburgh : W&R Chambers, 1922)
- 53 Brent-Dyer, *Jane and the Chalet School*, (Edinburgh and London : W&R Chambers, 1964)

Chapter Four: Who is Sylvia?

The Questioning Woman : Character in the Texts

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we saw how the use of an adventure plot in the school story can combine with the domestic discourse of the genre to provide liberating images for girls and women. It was clear, however, that, for any alternative model of being to be effective, it has to be embodied in characters with whom the reader can identify. The ability to create such characters is rare, and in this chapter we will be looking at Elinor Brent-Dyer as a prime example of those authors who did succeed in creating a fictive world with which their readers could identify, and who could therefore present to them powerfully liberating images. Brent-Dyer and others do this by concentrating in their writing on character, not plot, and by presenting their fictional characters as focalizers for the reader's identification. Their use of the focalizer is questioning rather than subordinating, and this is achieved partly by an interrogative interpretation of the character stereotypes of the genre, partly by the use of multiple focalizers, including the school itself, thus providing a range of perspective. Personal growth is encouraged by the use of morally complex focalizers and by the use of adult focalizers. This is achieved by the establishing the humanity of the staff, and presents possibilities of identification for adult readers as well as children. Finally, a fictive female community is created and, as the reader identifies with this, the liberating image becomes efficacious.

Plot versus character - actual authors

At the time when she wrote, Elinor Brent-Dyer's treatment of character was not only unusual in children's literature, but almost unique, the main element of writing for the young being, as we have seen, plot. This is strongly borne out by authors of the period, for in 1935 George Northcroft (the founder of the *Boys' Own Paper*) published a book also called *Writing For Children*, which combines practical advice with philosophy and observation. For our present purposes the greatest interest lies in a lengthy chapter

entitled *Methods of Work*; Northcroft wrote to a selection of popular children's authors of the time asking them how they set about writing their books, and the replies are fascinating. Characters do exist, and even sometimes refuse to do as their creators wish, but the main element of the story is undoubtedly the plot, and in most cases this is carefully worked out beforehand. Typical remarks are as follows:

'I do not let my characters work out their own salvation or fate. In short stories I know the beginning, middle and end before setting pen to paper.' (Robert Harding, writer of stories for boys).¹

'I think out the plot in its entirety and make my characters subservient all the while to the untying of the mystery ... the characters should ... not be allowed to take the bit between their teeth and become dominant personalities.' (May Marshall)²

Even Geoffrey Trease follows the same lines, claiming that the conventions of children's writing call for black and white villains and heroes:

'I do not believe that in juvenile literature there is much scope for really deep characterisation ... all else is subordinated to action.'³

Of plots he writes;

'How do I come by my plots? I make them rather like puddings. One collects a number of ingredients which are always appealing to boys, and tries to add those occasional novel elements which make all the difference to plots and puddings alike.'⁴

It would be unfair to imply that this was the point of view of all the writers questioned, but the remarks are representative of the general feeling of the time; action was all. The only contributor to the chapter who stands out in really strong contrast is Elinor Brent-Dyer. Northcroft remarks that she 'appears to work more largely under the influence of imagination than do some other people', and this is what she had to say:

'Half the time I have no idea what the ultimate end of any book will be ... Where fictional characters are concerned, they must make their own story. Perhaps the best way of expressing it is to say that I am the loudspeaker through which they broadcast.'⁵

In the first newsletter of the Chalet Club, the same point is stressed:

'So far as I am concerned, the people are *there*, just out of sight, but otherwise alive and panting to tell their stories ... It is *they* who tell the stories. I am merely the instrument.'

This is a point of view shared by very different (and much more critically acclaimed) writers. Russell Hoban, in a television interview in 1979, described his writing as a 'mediumistic activity' and said of his books, 'I don't know where it's going till it's been'.

The concept is commonplace in adult fiction. Rosamond Lehmann, for example, described the role of the novelist as receptive as much as manipulative, and wrote, in 1946:

'The author does not "invent" his (sic) characters or know about them from the outset. They reveal themselves gradually to him (sic) ... Characters must make plot or action; never the other way round.'⁶

This is, however, very rare in children's books.

Plot versus character - fictional authors

This dichotomy between plot and character is illustrated within the books, for many writers themselves create girls who are tellers of stories. When authors go beyond a bald statement of fact to give an insight into the creative process involved, the results are fascinating. Nancy Breary's Lindsay Dysart, for example, is found 'dreaming of wonderful situations which only needed words - the exactly right words unfortunately - and skilfully drawn characters to bring them to life'.⁷ (*The Impossible Prefect*, 1947). These are obviously the words of a plot-oriented author; it is the situations which are important, not the characters (though Lyndsay's writing itself is very important to her, and sets her apart from her schoolfriends, who regard it as a dispensable hobby.) Very different is the inspiration of Brent-Dyer's Jo Bettany, the main character of the *Chalet* series, through whom we catch illuminating glimpses of the workings and development of a writer's talent. Jo has 'scribbled' all her life, but when she is in her mid-teens her talent begins to develop, and she begins to find her work difficult, much to her own consternation:

'The characters would not do as she wanted. They insisted on going their own sweet way, and the story was developing on quite other lines than she had intended.'

Jo is worried and upset by this change in her writing pattern, but, for her creator, it is a promising sign, moving from plot-centred story-telling to the maturity of letting the characters speak for themselves and decide their own destiny:

'Her paper children were becoming real. It is only when a story tells itself that it is worth much.'⁸ (*Head Girl of the Chalet School*, 1928).

Of course this is all direct author intervention, but it is significant that this development of living characters in Jo's work is seen as a sign of maturity; the creation of plots alone is a child's game. The school Matron criticises Jo's first attempt at a school-story on the grounds of lack of realism in its character delineation;⁹ the heroine of Jo's later, successful book, Cecily, is 'merely an ordinary school-girl, who led quite an ordinary life at school', and the science mistress is based on a character sketch of the Chalet School's Miss Wilson.

It is perhaps ironic that the character of Jo herself suffers from the dichotomy between plot and character. She appears in the bulk of the series as an adult who is presented as an eternal schoolgirl. This has caused considerable and justifiable irritation to critics, but it is significant that it is Jo's 'getting into scrapes', with the concomitant *plot* devices of becoming stuck in a trunk and dying herself green which swing the character back into an unbecoming childishness. Juliet Gosling has suggested, in her MA thesis *A World of Girls*, that Jo's eternal childhood is a power issue, a means of maintaining her at the height of her power, as adult women lose theirs as the price of integration into society, and this is valid.¹⁰ However, Jo is most successful as an adult when wrestling with eel-like galley proofs and being bombarded with endless manuscripts from a 'wretched child from Rochdale'¹¹ - a function of her *character* as author.

Characters as focalizers

The significance of the stress on character is closely allied to perceptions of how children read, and the importance of a focalizer in the text. John Stephens has pointed out in his *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* that the basis of reading is a

surrender of the self to the text, and defines focalization as a mode of narration in which 'a subject position is constituted as the same as that occupied by a main character from whose perspective events are presented ... Readers identify with the character'.¹²

This can be a very positive process, giving the reader a subjecthood unattainable in their actual life circumstances, and this is particularly important for children and for women, who have traditionally often been unable to act as subjects of their own lives. It is a process by which the reader's own selfhood is effaced and the reader internalizes the perceptions and attitudes of the focalizer 'and is thus reconstituted as a subject within the text',¹³ and can result in a finding of oneself. That this process also has disadvantages is an inevitable consequence of the realisation that all texts carry within them their own ideology. A neutral text does not exist, and the reader who imagines she has found one has merely been reading a text which reflects her own ideological position and whose bias is therefore invisible. The process of identification with the focalizer is therefore one which involves submitting to the ideology of the text. Stephens points out that the word *subject* has a dual meaning. On the one hand it signifies the active initiator of events, but the meaning can be totally reversed to indicate 'the one who is *subjected*, existing or being placed under the authority of another'.¹⁴ Thus the response to a text can be subjected or interrogative, and the difference lies not in the inherent nature of events and characters described, but in the mode through which they are perceived, whether the text encourages readers to identify totally with the perceptions of the narrator or principal focalizer, or whether it makes use of strategies which distance the reader.

A close study of Brent-Dyer's writing strategy suggests that she does, indeed, provide interrogative texts, both through the use of such strategies, and through the provision of multiple focalizers. As has already been seen, there is frequently tension between the surface text and the subtext of school-stories, and if we look at the above-quoted passage concerning Jo Bettany and the development of her writing, the application here is clear. The paragraphs are obviously direct author intervention, suggesting at first glance that, as so often in children's fiction, the omniscient narrator is attempting to exert direct control over the reader, to subject her to her own ideology. Implicit author control is a characteristic marker of the discourse of children's fiction, for the very act of

identification renders the reader susceptible to having imposed on her a subject position from which she will read. In fact, however, Jo is herself the focalizer in the text; thus the intervention provides a distancing strategy by showing a separation between narrator-perception and focalizer-perception in making it obvious to readers that the focalizing character is misinterpreting a situation. Given all these caveats, what possibilities are opened up for the reader by the focalizers used in the texts?

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have suggested in *The Madwoman in the Attic*¹⁵ that women are constantly restricted in the creative process of writing by the literary images of angel and monster which male authors have generated for them, and if this is true for writers, it must be even more powerful a constraint on readers to whom these are presented as the only focalizers. In schoolgirl fiction in general, a clutch of stereotypes are offered for identification, and it is interesting to see whether these leave the reader in a position of subjection or interrogation.

Certainly in the books written at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries there is a polarity between characters who are angels and those who are rebels, with the carnivalesque firmly rejected and the most innocent of mischief being seen as evil. In L.T.Meade's *A Sweet Girl Graduate* (1886) and *The Rebel of the School* (1902), for example, the brilliant but unstable and rebellious Maggie and Kathleen ('monsters' in terms of acceptable femininity) are redeemed (that is, made into acquiescent personalities) by the virtuous Priscilla and Ruth; this is achieved only at the expense of great personal suffering - Priscilla is falsely accused of theft, Ruth is on the point of expulsion because she refuses to betray her friend and give details of her rule-breaking. This taming of the rebel in nineteenth-century fiction has been referred to in the previous chapter, and, if not accomplished by family or friends, it usually took place after a religious conversion or falling in love, the transformation being ultimately inevitable. It must be said that the rebels are uniformly attractive and invite much stronger identification than do the less clearly defined 'good' characters, but the reader is caught in a double bind, for the appearance of alternative focalizers is an illusion. The ideology of the text ensures that if the reader identifies with the 'good' character, she will replicate acceptable constructs of behaviour. If she identifies with the rebel, she will

be changed, as the character herself is changed. Thus, once again, focalization is being used as a means of control, and the subject positions available to the reader are restricted and restrictive.

Interrogative use of stereotypes

Elinor Brent-Dyer certainly used the character stereotypes of her era, but with a difference which allows an interrogative approach within the text. In 1926 there were still traces of the angel when Brent-Dyer created Robin Humphries, the significantly motherless and very delicate daughter of an old friend of the founder of the Chalet School, but the differences from the traditional stereotype are fundamental. The Robin is not a central character, therefore is not a focalizer and, from this more distanced position, the construct can be analysed and questioned. Robin is sweet-tempered, beautiful, and referred to by all as 'das Engelkind' (the Angelchild) but she is no redeemer; indeed, ultimately she has no story. While at school she is the petted darling of everyone, but she cannot cope with the harsh realities of adult life working in a settlement for the poor, and her fragile health collapses. She finally chooses the closure of the convent, after which she almost disappears from the books, to all intents and purposes dead, mirroring the physical death which was the fate of so many of her predecessors, but without their power of giving vicarious salvation to another. (Victorian heroines frequently die instead of someone else, either to save the other from wilful danger or wrongdoing or to effect a moral reformation in the other.)

If the angel is dead, the monster is rehabilitated. Even in Robin's case, her very occasional naughtiness is a sign of *health*, not of evil as it would have been in earlier books, and in later years it was the (usually Irish) rebel who captured the more robust imaginations of the readers. However, although this seems to indicate an interrogative approach which questions received constructs of behaviour, the fact that in most texts the Irish madcaps - pretty, blue-eyed, warm-hearted and spirited - are identical down to details of physical description controls the elements of the carnivalesque in their behaviour to the point where it cannot truly disrupt. Brent-Dyer's Biddy O'Ryan, first a

pupil then a teacher at the Chalet School, begins as the conventional Irish girl, an apparent clone of dozens of others in the literature of the period. But Biddy cannot stay in the realms of the stereotype. She takes on a very definite life of her own, and becomes one of Brent-Dyer's most attractive and long-lasting characters, changing the whole quality of identification and making her rebellion, mild though in fact it is, much more emotionally powerful. The continuation of her presence as an adult member of staff also contributes to the ability of the text to offer a multiplicity of focalizers, a theme to which we will return later.

Another very popular motif of the time was that of the princess at school;¹⁶ in terms of identification, it provided for the reader the status of class and the attraction of romance, but it was also an extremely stultifying role for a woman. Brent-Dyer quickly recognises this. Having created Elisaveta of Belsornia, the heroine of *Princess at the Chalet School* (1927), she has to rescue Jo Bettany from the fate of spending her future career as Elisaveta's lady's maid and, of course, no career is possible for the princess herself. Even here, however, Brent-Dyer's skill at character-creation enables the almost subliminal questioning of the stereotype. Elisaveta is a very authentic little girl, revelling in the freedom from protocol and having a warm relationship with her father and finding at school the kind of freedom forbidden to her in the normal circumstances of her life. Nor is Elisaveta's future a romantic 'happy ever after', and this is more than an attempt at realism, it allows her to break out of the mould. Her husband is killed in the Second World War, Belsornia is taken over by Communist forces, her father, the king, is exiled, and Elisaveta becomes a commoner, her daughter attending the school as plain José Helston. This process is painful, but releasing - it allows her to shatter the stereotype completely.

Stephens maintains that the majority of children's authors use a single focalizer, and this is a barrier to seeing the 'other' as anything but object. School-stories, with their inevitably large number of characters, cannot be restricted in this way, and provide a prime example of the 'other' in an interesting stereotype in many texts, the school 'Mam'selle'. If the focalizer is someone very different from oneself, this increases understanding and is a process of growth, and, for girls, a woman independent enough to

have left her own home and country has constructive possibilities as a focus of identification. Unfortunately, this is achieved in very few texts because of the limitations of the authors themselves - 'Mam'selle' is often a figure of fun and is always isolated. Perhaps it was the insularity of the rulers of an Empire which made every foreigner seem ridiculous, perhaps it was unconscious hostility to a woman so autonomous that she chose to leave her own country, but most *assistantes* are treated in the same way as the 'Mamzelle' created by Enid Blyton in the *St. Clare's* series, 'funny old hot-tempered, flat-footed thing'.¹⁷ Blyton does claim in *The Story of My Life* that 'she was one of the French mistresses I had at school ... she is one of the few people who live on in my books, real and unchanged',¹⁸ and she at least treats her ridiculous creation with affection. Sybil Owsley's Mademoiselle in *Skimpy and the Saint* (1923) is, by contrast, both incompetent and pathetic, and Skimpy and her friends in fact cause so much trouble for her that she is ultimately dismissed. Even the incidental descriptions of Mademoiselle are derogatory; when she challenges an inattentive and insolent pupil she is described, by the author, as 'the outraged Frenchie'.¹⁹ Skimpy, having effected Mademoiselle's removal, is stricken with remorse when she finds her collecting left-over food from a school party because she is so hungry, and the ultimate impression is of a pathetic and ostracised human being.

Even the Mesdemoiselles who are not incompetent or ridiculous are alone. The very fact that they are known by a generic title rather than by name puts them in the category of a non-person and even those who, like the woman in E.L.Haverfield's *Girls of St. Olave's* (1919), are courageous and respected, are inevitably isolated. 'Mlle.' is liked and respected by the girls, but when she asks them to speak to her in French so that she can understand their jokes, Vera, at least, is impressed, having never before realised how isolated the woman felt having to communicate always in a foreign language.²⁰

The only schools in which foreign staff are fully integrated, and therefore available as possible focalizers, are those few which are situated abroad, and it is not always true even then. Angela Brazil's Swiss Villa Alpina (*Nesta's New School*, 1932) is largely run by English women, and the French members of staff receive only a casual mention,²¹ and in Elsie Oxenham's *Expelled From School*, 1919 (where the school in question is

situated in Vevey), Mme. Dufour, the principal, is insensitive and imperceptive, while her deputy is totally incompetent.²² On the other hand, the French sisters who run the convent school in May Baldwin's *Girls of St. Gabriel's* are fine women,²³ and Frau Alsberg, the principal of the German school in Jeanie Hering's *Golden Days* (1873), is an excellent teacher, and extremely popular: 'the children in the school loved her devotedly, and would have done for her what they would have done for no-one else'.²⁴

Again, however, it is Elinor Brent-Dyer who truly questions the stereotype. British insularity is avoided amongst the staff in the *Chalet* series, where both Thérèse Lepâttré and Jeanne de Lachenais play an important part in the school. Mlle. Lepâttré is, indeed, its co-founder; she takes over the Headship after the marriage of Madge Bettany, and is always portrayed as a competent, intelligent and cultured woman. Jeanne de Lachenais is Senior Mistress at the school for many years, a brisk, alert and energetic woman who spends her holidays mountaineering in the Alps and whose sole stereotypically gallic characteristic is that she makes better coffee than her British colleagues. The staff of the Chalet School are much more cosmopolitan than is true of the usual run of school-stories, but the portrayal in all the above books of staff of other nationalities as real human beings is strikingly unusual in its historical context.

Multiple and morally complex focalizers; school as focalizer

To avoid being subjected to the text, the reader needs a number of different subject positions with which to identify, and one way of providing these is through a series, which provides a whole range of different focalizers, while retaining the security of the old and familiar characters. The advantages of this are again exemplified by Elinor Brent-Dyer, as she was unique in the extent of her writing. The fifty-nine books of the *Chalet* series are paralleled only by Elsie Oxenham in her *Abbey* books, which very quickly cease to be school-stories, and by Angela Brazil who, despite her vast output, never attempted a series.

The strength of Brent-Dyer's lengthy series is that she can show development in many of her minor characters in a totally credible way. Prudence Dawbarn, a fairly minor

character, matures during the series from a wild nuisance into a reasonably responsible Senior, and nothing at all happens to Prue, she merely grows up. There is even a touch of irony in her rather stormy relationship with her Juniors, who object to the presumption of a former rebel who is now trying to make them uphold the rules.²⁵

Character development is a lengthy process, and the series allows Brent-Dyer to show it over many volumes in Jo Maynard's triplet daughters. Con's daydreaming is still making her irresponsible when she is Sixth Form Prefect,²⁶ and even Len is still fussing and worrying and being taken to task for an over-scrupulous conscience at much the same age.²⁷ As for Margot, we follow her constant fight with her uncontrollable rages from the infant tantrums in *Jo to the Rescue* (number 19 of the series) to an outburst which almost causes her to be expelled in *Chalet School Triplets* (number 49). Even after that she is brusque and unsympathetic, and although Brent-Dyer does her very best in finally making her a medical missionary, the outcome is never entirely convincing.

Writers who concentrate on character inevitably create focalizers who are morally complex. Dorita Fairlie Bruce's Nancy Caird is a very mixed character, wild and disobedient, yet straightforward and honourable; Elsie Oxenham's Retta Garnet is weak and easily led into behaviour alien to her basically honest nature; Joy Shirley of the *Abbey* books is selfish and egocentric, and, in more modern times, both Antonia Forest's²⁸ and Harriet Martyn's²⁹ girls are very ambivalent creatures. Elinor Brent-Dyer illustrates the necessity for morally mixed characters in her account of Jo's first (abortive) book, where Malvina, the heroine, 'proved to be a most alluring person, with all the virtues that were ever known', while the villain, Rosetta, is the epitome of depravity, who causes even her creator some pangs of anxiety: 'Privately Jo was beginning to feel uneasy about her. Surely no girl ever lived who was capable of such wickedness.'³⁰

Jo's unease is fully justified when Matron Lloyd reads the precious story and is scathing in the extreme about this impossibly bad villain and irritatingly good heroine, insisting on the book being consigned to the incinerator. Jo eventually succeeds with an 'ordinary' heroine, and all Brent-Dyer's characters are mixed. Even Mary-Lou Trelawney, a strikingly honest and straightforward young woman, is condemned as

'shifty' by her Headmistress when she has sneaked a pair of cutting-out scissors into school to use in the garden when the girls have been forbidden to use secateurs.³¹ Margot Maynard is seriously immoral on occasion (In *Theodora and the Chalet School* she attempts to get Theodora expelled because she is jealous of the other girl's close friendship with her own triplet sister), and Jo herself is often dangerously disobedient as a child, and castigates herself in later life for her thoughtless and turbulent youth.

Part of the objection to super-heroes or villains is a moral one. Jo's book is intended for her young niece and her adopted sister, and Matron is insistent upon the moral responsibility of the writer: 'Your gift was given you to help your fellow-men (sic), not to hinder them. You won't help if you give them people so bad that they're either comic or irritating.'³² Deeper than this, however, is the fact that no reader can identify at any significant level with a perfect character. The imperfections and minor evils of normal humanity have to exist before a fictional character can truly act as a focalizer.

Josephine Elder, who is always fascinated by the intricacies of relationships, carries the theme of moral growth through identification a stage further in *The Scholarship Girl at Cambridge*³³, and in doing so fulfils all the requirements for personal growth through interrogative identification with the character.

John Stephens speaks of the strategy of placing the character within situations which construct a number of self-other interactions:

'The crucial ideological implication is then whether the self demands that the other replicate the self's desires, whether the other overwhelms the self ... or whether self can negotiate with the other so as to encourage personal growth',³⁴ and this text is a perfect illustration of the principle.

Monica Baxter, intelligent, sports-loving and popular, takes under her wing the dreary, scruffy 'rabbit,' Hester Williams, and tries to bring her into the life of the college. Monica's motives are excellent, but her perceptions are limited, and it is a long while before she realises that she and Hester want different things from life.

Hester appears to drag Monica down to her own level, having a disastrous effect on both her intellectual and sporting life, but the situation is not as simple as that. Monica has woken Hester up, but has then tried to make her into a carbon copy of herself, rather

than releasing her to follow her own bent. Hester is constantly the inferior, not an equal partner in the relationship, which is thus no real friendship at all. Eventually the inevitable happens. Hester breaks away to find her own friends and interests, and finds them in people and things which Monica hates. Monica is freed to return to her former way of life - but Hester's choice is presented as equally valid.

Any school-story is inevitably difficult to handle. It is an unwieldy medium, with a large number of people and constantly changing groups, and in any series the focal characters have at some point to leave. The fluidity and brevity of life of a school population, and the need to keep the genre within the bounds of a domestic discourse and avoid plots which are too melodramatic, are much easier to deal with if the school itself is a strong and independent 'character' in its own right, but very few authors have succeeded in creating such a school. When it can be achieved, many of the problems of plot solve themselves. The school year gives structure to the action, and if the school itself is credible, the trivial, everyday details begin to matter. Several authors have realised that true involvement occurs at the level of the minutiae of daily life. Major excitement is caused if a mistress changes her hairstyle, and girls enthuse over 'a lovely new exercise book, a specially big, strongly-bound book such as were only issued to the Sixth Form'.³⁵ Joanna Lloyd's Catherine, who goes to school with great intellectual expectations, finds that the girls do not talk about history, literature or philosophy but 'of who would be in the first house team and of what Miss Gray had said to Mary when she arrived late for a history lesson, and of what ingredients went to form the cottage pie that they had had for supper the night before'.³⁶

In Nancy Breary's *It Was Fun in the Fourth* (1948), a group of girls adopt the delicate sister of one of their prefects, who longs to be at school herself. They send Hazel letters and photographs, but the thing which she most enjoys is identifying herself with their normal school routine. 'I was terribly interested in your timetables and all your games and practice and dormitory and hair-washing lists', writes Hazel, 'it makes it all so real',³⁷ and the girls explain to their Headmistress, 'her governess lets her use some of our textbooks, and she does missionary work, and her hair is washed on the same day as ours'.³⁸

Supreme amongst schools which can be used as a focalizer must be the Chalet School, which, because of the deep involvement of the author in her own fictive world, is brought to life in such loving detail that we even know the business arrangements governing its running. We follow the school from its very beginning through and beyond its coming of age and watch its development from a tiny establishment with just a few pupils and very inexperienced staff into a large multi-ethnic community run by a very professional team. Every moment of the school day is mapped out in minute (if, over the years, sometimes contradictory) detail, routines, rooms and meals are lovingly itemised, we are told what text-books are used, whole lessons are described in detail, homework is discussed, and the school itself takes on a life which gives stability and continuity to its shifting population. Indeed, so strongly was Brent-Dyer absorbed in her own creation that, when she started her own school in Hereford in 1938, she tried very hard to model it along the lines of the Chalet School, to the extent that her actual pupils wore a uniform identical to that of her fictional girls and even acted the same end-of-term plays - the ultimate example of the word made flesh.³⁹

Wider possibilities offered by adult focalizers

Elinor Brent-Dyer's own identification with and great affection for her characters made it impossible for her to lose touch with any of them, so that many are followed far beyond their school lives, and this can be problematic. It is always difficult to extend a child character into an adult; it is a different kind of writing, and many authors are not interested in making the attempt. Kathleen Peyton has remarked:

'Characters in my mind die on me after the age of twenty. I follow them thus far, enjoying them enormously, but after that I lose interest. I don't even want to know what happens to them after I have finished with them.'⁴⁰

Elsie Oxenham follows her Abbey girls to the third generation, but the characters never develop in any meaningful way. They remain curiously childlike, their only concession to adulthood being to lose their passion for folk-dancing, and the situations in the later books are repetitive.

Dorita Fairlie Bruce makes the same attempt with her much-loved Dimsie, but this very engaging girl eventually loses her character altogether. She becomes almost an abstract force for good, returning to rescue Jane's from the evil into which it has fallen, and is finally apotheosised as Dimsie the Healer.

Jo Bettany, the major focalizer of Brent-Dyer's *Chalet School*, is an excellent child-character, but for a very large part of the series she appears as an adult, and here Brent-Dyer encounters the difficulties common to her colleagues. Many critics have been justifiably irritated by Jo's continuing existence as a pseudo-schoolgirl, but the prolongation does have advantages. Jo's continued presence gives the series a stability which is important in preserving the illusion of credibility and she is also a means of extending the action beyond the school. Her motherhood is archetypal ('when she likes she can be nothing but a *mother*', declares Prunella Davidson),⁴¹ but as a mother herself she introduces into the books a family element which is very unusual in school-stories, and which provides wider possibilities of action than does the restricted world of school.

A further extension is made possible by Jo's links with former schoolfellows, and this creates a much wider world than that of the traditionally restrictive and restricted boarding-school. Problems which have no direct connection with schoolgirls can be aired and a life much wider than theirs implied, and this is valuable.

This wide use of prominent mature characters is a complicated procedure, as using a grown-up ex-pupil or member of staff as a focalizer is to predicate an imaginative connection with an *adult*. The actual readers of these texts are supposedly girls (and quite young ones at that), but the reader is frequently given access, through the staff, to information denied to the fictional schoolgirls because of their age. As an example, Elinor Brent-Dyer's attitude towards ex-staff who are having babies is coy in the extreme, reaching the depths of the ludicrous when, in *The Chalet School and the Lintons* (1934), Jo, at seventeen, is totally unaware of her sister's pregnancy until the baby is born.⁴² However, the staff in the books discuss such events freely and in *Ruey Richardson: Chaletian* (1960), we even have Evadne Lannis unburdening herself to Jo; marrying rather late in life, she has been afraid that she is too old to have a baby, and is now rejoicing in her pregnancy.⁴³ *Ruey* was admittedly published almost thirty years

later than *Lintons*, but changes in attitude are not the point here. What is important is that the reader is given information denied to the main child focalizers; this is an indication both that the author is providing focalizers for her adult readers and that she is using the adult characters as a focalizer for herself.

That Brent-Dyer did this is undoubted, and she clearly had at some level an image of herself as the ideal Headmistress as exemplified by Madge Bettany or Hilda Annersley.⁴⁴ However, she was not only a teacher, she was paramountly an author, and here the same mixture of fantasy and reality applies in an obvious identification with Jo Bettany/Maynard. Jo is even included more than once in lists of actual authors. In *The Chalet School Goes To It*, Gwensi Howell has on her bookshelves rows of books by Elsie Oxenham, Dorita Fairlie Bruce, Winifred Darch and Josephine M. Bettany, while in *Lorna at Wynyards* Lorna is thrilled to find on her cousin's shelves the works of 'Elsie Oxenham, Winifred Darch, Dorita Bruce ... and Josephine Bettany'.⁴⁵

Perhaps because of this strong identification, one of Elinor Brent-Dyer's most striking achievements is her ability to create strong adult characters in the school staff. This is allied to the perception that teachers are real human beings with whom it is possible to identify, but there is a further problem in that women teachers have not always been perceived as positive role-models.

Rehabilitation of teachers as role-models and focalizers

During the time of the greatest popularity of girls' school-stories, the teaching profession (or at least that part of it administered by the state) was closed to married women. As it was also true that the only roles totally acceptable for middle-class women at the time were those of wife and mother, and that educated women were regarded with deep suspicion, teachers could hardly avoid being a race apart and it seemed to many of their students that the only means of entry into a heterosexual and patriarchal society was by *denial* of such potential role-models. It was difficult to perceive their life as a valid and valuable alternative when, as Mary Evans points out in *A Good School*, her study of her girls' grammar school in the 1950s, no-one had ever seriously suggested to these

intelligent girls that life was about anything other than marriage and children. Because these women did not have husbands, the girls looked upon them as second-class citizens: 'we did not respect them as individuals or regard them as "role-models". Indeed, we wanted to be as unlike them as possible.'⁴⁶

It must be admitted that the intense dedication of some of the early teachers had made them seem like beings from another planet. In 1892, Dorothea Beale wrote in the school magazine of Cheltenham Ladies' College a tribute to the recently-deceased Mathematics mistress, Martha Brown, remembering her as :

'a most enthusiastic spirit; some will remember how she gathered her pupils round her day by day when she lay on her death-bed, and would not be denied the joy of teaching.'⁴⁷

Such priorities were precisely those which placed their teachers beyond the comprehension of Mary Evans and her peers, because not all the skill, dedication and apparent happiness of these women could compensate for the fact that they did not have a man, and were therefore, by definition, incomplete. They were unable to understand why people who were not, like themselves, forced to be in a girls' school, living a life without men, should choose to do so, and no-one ever suggested to them the explanation which would have opened up for them new possibilities, namely 'that women could create viable and creative communities independent of men. But this argument was as singularly absent as the recognition of the female body or an assertion of the potential strength of women'.⁴⁸

If social constructs made it impossible for Mary Evans and her peers to perceive intelligent, unmarried women as role-models, the importance of narratives which can challenge or circumvent these restraints is emphasised, and this is exactly what many of the texts do. The only means of achieving this in terms of literature must be by an identification with the characters which is strong enough to counter-balance the reader's preconceptions and to enable the imagination to triumph over social conditioning and the texts do, in fact, achieve this by presenting professional women as 'normal' people with whom relationship and identification are both possible and desirable.

Presenting teachers as normal human beings accessible to others is therefore of paramount importance. Even the most dedicated mistresses are presented as enjoying an occasional respite from their job, and this is a consistent emphasis which spans all decades and even centuries. In 1875, in Louisa Gray's *Ada and Gerty*, the two girls live in fear of Ada's being kept at school as a punishment instead of being allowed to spend her holiday with Gerty; the thought that Miss Maria herself might regard the prospect with just as much distaste, preferring to spend her holidays on her own, untrammelled by a naughty pupil, does not even enter their heads, but is clearly presented for the reader's consideration.⁴⁹

Half a century later, in 1924, Lena Tyack's Miss Denison 'loved her work, she loved her girls, but it is possible to have enough even of what we love',⁵⁰ and in the 1960s Elinor Brent-Dyer's Miss Derwent rids herself of a stormy class as quickly as she can - 'Miss Derwent had had more than enough of VA that morning and dismissed them on the first stroke of the bell',⁵¹ and her colleague, Miss Smith, abandons her marking wondering 'if she had taught badly or Lower IVb was composed mainly of half-wits'.⁵²

Elinor Brent-Dyer forcibly stresses the point that teachers are people in her first *Chalet Club News Letter*, in an answer to a childish complaint that staff were 'utterly inhuman'. Pointing out that mistresses suffer, like their pupils, from toothache and headaches and colds, but have to carry on with their work unless they are really too ill to be on their feet, she encourages her young readers not to judge their teacher too harshly when they next get into trouble:

'Just remember that she may not be feeling well; or she may have had bad news from home; or she may just be thoroughly annoyed because no matter how hard she tries, you seem to be all set to do your worst.'

Brent-Dyer's mistresses are short-tempered when they feel ill, and become as irritable in bad weather as do their pupils. In a hot, sticky week, 'people found themselves being hauled up for mistakes which normally would have been passed over with either a laugh or an exclamation',⁵³ and even the tranquil Head is snappy in private.

The most obvious expression of the humanity and accessibility of the Staff is the informality of their private relationships. Once behind the staffroom door, the image of

starched professionalism is dropped and mistresses smoke, read novels, eat chocolates, discuss clothes, use slang and insult each other with cheerful impunity. This is less startling in a society like our own which is essentially much less formal and where there is less of a gap between the image and the person; presentday teachers would be unlikely to react like Elinor Brent-Dyer's Miss Wilson who, on being disturbed during her holiday by an unexpected parental visit, hastily conceals her chocolates and 'thriller' novel under the cushion of her chair,⁵⁴ but in the context of its time it has a delightful informality. A few writers give a genuinely vivid insight into life in the staffroom, and here Elinor Brent-Dyer is supreme in the total authenticity of her representation of the minutiae of staffroom life. Colleagues are fulminated against for illegible lab orders, untidy staffroom tables and squashed examination papers, and, in *Lavender Laughs At The Chalet School*, Miss Slater is congratulating herself on having completed her reports with no disasters, recalling with horror the previous year when she had made mistakes on three reports and had had to go round every other member of staff concerned and get them to rewrite their own comments, being roundly cursed in the process.⁵⁵

It is this kind of detail, based on her own long teaching experience, which draws a heart-felt response from every teacher-reader, and stamps Brent-Dyer as a uniquely authoritative writer in the field.

Adult focalizers as agents of growth

The use of adults as focalizers is important for personal growth, for the realisation of one's mentor's humanity can be a deeply disturbing process, revealing both practical powerlessness and moral weakness where omnipotence and strength had been taken for granted.

Josephine Elder's Barbara (*Barbara At School*) hides in the Staff dining-room for a dare, and is amazed to hear the rather ordinary, dull conversation and astonished, too, to find that the mistresses actually entertain opinions about the food, disliking it as much as the girls, and are equally powerless to do anything about it, as if they complain, the cook will give notice. This evidence of powerlessness from those perceived as omnipotent is at

first profoundly disturbing, but even more distressing to Barbara is the fact that the staff have opinions about the girls themselves:

'It was horrible to listen to them talking about one like this.... It was odd to think that they might like or dislike one, thinking one girl pretty and another dull, and being glad or sorry or annoyed about what one did.'⁵⁶ Thus the security of a relationship with a teaching machine is replaced by the uncertainty common to all human relationships, with its lack of predictability but ultimate potential for growth.

In Elder's *Evelyn Finds Herself*, Evelyn and her friend Elizabeth are subjected at first to unfair treatment then to unwanted friendliness from the Games mistress and have to cope, for the first time, with the fact that mistresses are not above petty injustices based on personal likes and dislikes, and are not always worthy of respect. After the first shock of finding that mistresses are human, with its implication of fallibility and vulnerability as well as accessibility, they begin to want to look behind the public image of the other members of staff, to see them as something other than machines who teach and punish, 'creatures entirely without feeling, to be avoided'.⁵⁷

Shocked and fascinated by the realisation that teachers have likes and dislikes strong enough to need control, and are capable of being hurt by the girls they rule, they pursue the idea into a deep analysis of the motivation of each member of staff, and in examining and thinking about this, they reach a level of knowledge of themselves and of the possibilities of relationship which exceed all their expectations and open the way for their own personal emotional development.

Creation of fictive female community

The plot of many school-stories concentrates on the bringing in to the community of the outsider, whether pupil or teacher, and it is deeply significant that the fictive world created is a female community. Martha Vicinus has shown in *Independent Women : Work and community for single women 1850 - 1920*⁵⁸ the importance of single-sex communities for women in creating an imaginative and emotional space, an alternative to the restricting nuclear family and a possibility of economic independence. We have seen

that an important element in the creation of this community within the texts is the strength of characterisation of the staff of the schools, which not only gives stability in contrast to the quickly-changing pupil community, but creates powerful role-models; this is a fundamental challenge to the surface of the text, and to the assumption that marriage is the end for which God made woman, for whatever the texts say, they create adult focalizers who provide very different possibilities.

Marriage, however lauded, means exclusion from the community even for those most closely connected with it. In Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Chalet School*, even the founder, Madge Bettany, leaves as soon as she marries, and other pivotal staff, Mollie Maynard, Con Stewart, Biddy O'Ryan, Hilary Burn, have to make the same choice between marriage and the female community. It is only in the later years of the series that characters can articulate their choice of the community, as does Kathy Ferrars in her cry 'the fact is, I'm a born teacher ... I love it! And I don't want anything else',⁵⁹ but the other unmarried staff, notably the Heads, Miss Annersley and Miss Wilson, do so tacitly throughout. Theirs is the true adult life as intelligent, responsible, autonomous women creating their own story and the contrast is pointed by Jo Maynard herself who, locked into an eternal childhood, can only create stories for others. We have seen that it is adults who identify with the adults in the text, and this perhaps rather delayed discovery of alternative possibilities, either instead of or in addition to marriage and a family, is surely one of the factors which makes intelligent, adult women regard these books as both having been and still being the most important in their lives.

Conclusion

Readers want to be like the characters with whom they identify, and the strength and skill of the creation of focalizers in many of the texts makes possible the internalisation of the liberating images and of the different possibilities for female readers presented to them in the texts. The questioning of the stereotype and the provision of a wide range of characters for identification gives broad possibilities and varying perspectives; the creation of morally complex focalizers and of adult characters with whom the reader

identifies opens the way for personal and emotional growth and maturation; it also makes possible the inclusion of adult readers in the focalizing process so that they, too, can internalise the images. Finally, the offering to the reader of a complete fictive universe which is essentially female enables girls and women to find different ways of becoming and to envisage alternative modes of being from those traditionally offered by society. The following chapters will analyse how these liberating images operate in the areas which are central to the texts, that is, games, religion and relationships.

- 1 George Northcroft, *Writing for Children*, (London: A&C Black, 1935), p.5
- 2 *ibid.* p.60
- 3 *ibid.* p.58
- 4 *ibid.* p.81
- 5 *ibid.* p.60
- 6 Rosamund Lehmann, 'The Future of the Novel,' in *Britain Today*, (London, June 1946), quoted by Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Professsion*, (London : Virago, 1983), p.158
- 7 Nancy Breary, *The Impossible Prefect*, (London and Glasgow : Blackie, 1947), p.60
- 8 Elinor Brent-Dyer, *The Head Girl of the Chalet School*, (London and Edinburgh : W&R Chambers Ltd. 1928), pp. 135/136
- 9 Brent-Dyer, *Jo Returns to the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1936), p.42
- 10 Juliet Gosling, 1998. Section 6, 'The World of the Chalet School', subsection V, 'Power and Control', para. 30 in *A World of Girls*. Form HTTP. Available at <http://users.netmatters.co.uk/ju90/pow.htm>
- 11 Brent-Dyer, *Joey and Co. in Tirol*, (Chambers, 1960), p.163
- 12 John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, (Language in Social Life Series, London and New York : Longman Group, 1992), pp.49,57
- 13 *ibid.* p.68
- 14 *ibid.* p.55
- 15 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1979)
- 16 This was not nonsense, for pre-War Europe had more than its share of minor nobility, and Elinor Brent-Dyer herself numbered the daughters of the Emperor Haile Selassie amongst the pupils of her school at Hereford for a time.
- 17 Enid Blyton, *The Second Form at St. Clare's*, (London, Methuen & Co., 1944), p.10
- 18 Blyton, *The Story of My Life*, (London : Pitkins, 1952)
- 19 Sybil Owsley, *Skimpy and the Saint*, (London : The Sheildon Press, 1923), p.11
- 20 E.L. Haverfield, *The Girls of St. Olave's*, (London and Glasgow : Collins Clear-Type Press, 1919), p.252
- 21 Angela Brazil, *Nesta's New School*, (London : Blackie & Son, 1932)
- 22 Elsie Oxenham, *Expelled From School*, (London:Collins, 1919)
- 23 May Baldwin, *Girls of St. Gabriel's*, (London and Edinburgh : W&R Chambers, 1905)
- 24 Jeanie Hering, *Golden Days*, (London, Paris and New York : Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1873), p.24
- 25 Brent-Dyer, *Redheads at the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1964), pp.106-108, 116
- 26 Brent-Dyer, *Two Sams at the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1967)
- 27 Brent-Dyer, *Chalet School Triplets*, (Chambers, 1963)
- 28 Antonia Forest, *Autumn Term*, 1948 *End of Term*, 1959 *The Cricket Term*, 1974 *The Attic Term* 1976 (all London : Faber and Faber)
- 29 Harriet Martyn, *Jenny and the Syndicate*, (London : Hippo Books, 1982) *Jenny and the New Headmistress*, (London : André Deutsch, 1984) *Jenny and the New Girls*, (London : André Deutsch, 1985).
- 30 Brent-Dyer, *Jo Returns*, p.37
- 31 Brent-Dyer, *Shocks for the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1952)
- 32 Brent-Dyer, *Jo Returns to the Chalet School*, p.42
- 33 Josephine Elder, *The Scholarship Girl at Cambridge* (London, Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1926)
- 34 John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (London and New York: Longman Group, 1992), p.282
- 35 Joanna Lloyd, *Catherine, Head of the House*, (London and Glasgow : Blackie & Son, 1947), p.62
- 36 *ibid.* p.20
- 37 Nancy Breary, *It Was Fun in the Fourth*, (London : Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948), p.131
- 38 *ibid.* p.198

- 39 Helen McClelland, *Behind the Chalet School* (Bognor Regis: New Horizon, 1981), Chapter 19.
- 40 Edward Blishen (ed), *The Thorny Paradise : Writers on Writing for Children*, (Harmondsworth : Kestrel, 1975)
- 41 Brent-Dyer, *Trials for the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1959), p.217
- 42 Brent-Dyer, *The Chalet School and the Lintons*, (Chambers, 1934)
- 43 Brent-Dyer, *Ruey Richardson Chaletian*, (Chambers, 1960)
- 44 Helen McClelland, *Behind the Chalet School* (Bognor Regis: New Horizon, 1981), Chapter 19.
- 45 Brent-Dyer, *Lorna at Wynyards*, (London and Redhill : Lutterworth Press, 1947), p.36
- 46 Mary Evans, *A Good School : Life at a girls' grammar school in the 1950s*, (London : The Women's Press, 1991), pp 70 and 69
- 47 School Magazine of Cheltenham Ladies' College, 1892 edition, Dorothea Beale's Preface.
- 48 Mary Evans, *A Good School* p.72
- 49 Louisa Gray, *Ada and Gerty, or, hand in hand heavenwards*, (London : Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1875), p.165
- 50 Lena Tyack, *The Girl Who Lost Things*, (London : S.W.Partridge and Co., 1924), p.9
- 51 Brent-Dyer, *A Genius at the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1956), p.151
- 52 Brent-Dyer, *Summer Term at the Chalet School*, (Chambers, 1965), p.69
- 53 Brent-Dyer, *Excitements at the Chalet School* (Chambers, 1957), p.115
- 54 Brent-Dyer, *Lavender Laughs*, p.20
- 55 Brent-Dyer, *Lavender*, p.274
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- 57 *ibid.* p.38
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Chapter Five : Playing the Game

The Strong Woman : Games in the texts

Introduction

There are few elements more fundamental to school-stories for both boys and girls than games. From the winning goal scored by the heroine/hero to the deeply influential moral connotations of the phrase 'playing the game', they are the most firmly-entrenched cliché of the genre. There is, however, a profound difference in the significance of games for girls and for boys. Although the presentation of games and the games ethic in boys' literature is far from unproblematic, it presents for girls a change in discourse which is either life-changing or life-threatening, according to one's point of view. Nineteenth century medical discourse categorised women as wounded and diseased, as physically, emotionally and morally feeble; their primary function in life was to reproduce, and they should not expend their finite energies on anything else. These theories were based on incorrect medical paradigms, but were, nevertheless, extremely useful in buttressing sociological theories about woman's role which was thus controlled by powerful medical and moral discourses.

The development of games-playing opened up possibilities of different images, those of the strong, active, achieving woman, and was thus in many ways a liberation. Even the clothes that had to be worn for games brought freedom, a visible mirroring of the psychological independence they fostered. Although society eventually accepted that games promoted rather than threatened health, there was great fear that physically active women would lose their femininity, and this was well-founded, as the playing of games did help women to begin to overcome the constructs imposed on them by society.

The physical reality of games is only one part of the equation in school fiction. A whole structure of morality had been built on games by the boys' public schools, and girls, who had been perceived as being morally frail, could be included in this masculine construct of morality, and could become strong. The disadvantage was that they could gain this strength only by becoming part of a masculine paradigm, by becoming 'gentlemen'. However, because girls were not boys, there was enough distance in their

participation for authors to be able to attempt a meaningful analysis of the public school ethic and re-interpret it in more useful terms. The final liberating image is of powerful, responsible women, who have been able to reclaim both physical and moral strength.

Medical paradigms as discourses of power; theories of menstruation, finite energy and eugenics

Before discussing specifically the medical theories which controlled women's lives, it is important to recognise that, in the terms of Michel Foucault, they form a discourse which exerts immense power. Although some of Foucault's premises are problematic for feminists (as is this very insistence that power resides in discourse, not in the hands of any group of people, and his definition of all power as producing knowledge rather than repression), his work has supported the view that not only gender, but sex and bodies are social constructions and are produced as effects of power. In *Discipline and Punish* (1979), he is concerned with the way in which modern societies produce 'docile bodies', and the voluntary self-policing and surveillance which subjectively inscribe on the body the societal construct; an example of this is the way in which women embrace the construct 'femininity' through slimming, electrolysis and distorting and painful clothing. Discourses define what is normal, and anything that does not fit this definition is then seen as in need of being made to conform.¹

Foucault's work is ultimately inadequate as it remains in the realms of theory and has no connection to the actual life experience of women, and gives no explanation as to why one discourse is accepted as 'truth' instead of another. For Foucault, of course, all discourses are 'truth', and resistance consists precisely in the formulation of a different discourse, but he does not address the practicalities of first being able to perceive and then achieving recognition for an alternative discourse from a position of lack of economic and political power. Nevertheless, his concepts are useful in understanding the prevalent attitude to women's bodies in the late nineteenth century when games for girls began to be suggested, as these theories were governed by very specific medical and scientific discourses, namely prevalent theories of menstruation and finite energy, the

eugenics movement and Darwinism and, later, the tenets of socio-biology. Common to all these was the stress on women's biological function as mothers and the assumption that physical (or, indeed, mental) activity was a threat to this. This was based on a fusion of several false premises which gained their power from the fact that the late nineteenth century physicians were amongst the first of the 'experts' to claim a scientific foundation for their discourse - for their pronouncements on how women should behave and what they were capable of doing both physically and mentally.

Julia Swindells has shown in her *Victorian Writing and Working Women*² that the period 1840 to 1855 is one of the most significant eras in the history of medicine. Between these dates, the British Medical Association was founded, Florence Nightingale discovered her vocation to reform the hospital service, and seventeen medical reform bills were discussed in Parliament. This centralization and consolidation gave to the medical establishment an image of professionalism and a great deal of power and, as a result, the fact that their pronouncements were based on acceptance of the traditional sociological constructs for women was hidden,³ and their discourse was given immutable authority:

'medical concepts which we begin to see as complicated, perhaps devious, symbolic systems ... appear in society as 'natural' ... In appearing 'natural,' medical knowledge thus confers upon itself the status of common sense or truth.'⁴

Jennifer Hargreaves has pointed out that the body is particularly vulnerable to the invasion of ideology because it exhibits 'apparent autonomy, as if it is self-determined and immune from manipulation'. Thus societal constructs become a part of everyday consciousness and seem nothing more than common sense, particularly when they are thoroughly internalised by the majority of women, who then behave in a way which appears to prove the scientific 'facts'.⁵

The wounded woman

The first great truth which provided a rationale for male control of female bodies was that women were intrinsically physically debilitated and diseased. Because the male body

was seen as the norm, the specifically female functions of menstruation, pregnancy and menopause became 'other' and were perceived as physically and psychologically threatening. American obstetrician John Goodman claimed in 1878 that women were affected by a menstrual wave which affected the entire woman and rendered her periodically unstable and liable to serious derangement. Not only was she mad, but unclean. Menstruation taboos are, of course, deeply entrenched in every society, and the concept of blood which is at once sacred and contaminating is endemic. Vertinsky cites Soranus, an early theoretician in the field of gynaecology, who felt that both men and women generated surplus matter; women eliminated it as menstrual blood, men through athletics.⁶

These arguments of physical contamination were used to prevent women becoming doctors, but, again, perceived physical weakness is allied to societal constructs of femininity; *The Lancet* claimed in that women were unfit to be doctors because 'only a man could brave the revolting scenes of childbirth',⁷ and that 'any woman who is logical, philosophical and scientific departs from the normal woman in her physical as well as her mental characteristics.'⁸

Medical discourse thus constructed a social reality of 'problems', and girls and women were encouraged to perceive normal functions as disorders requiring treatment. The whole of women's education was coloured by the conviction that they were life-long martyrs to 'the tyranny of their organisation', and Patricia Vertinsky has shown in her *The Eternally Wounded Woman* (1990) that the theories were very similar in Britain and America, being widely diffused between the two countries. In England in 1869, J.M.Allan was contending that every woman is always more or less an invalid, and cannot therefore pursue uninterrupted physical or mental activity:

'Nature disables the whole sex, single as well as married, from competing on equal terms with men.'⁹

Across the Atlantic, the message was the same; in 1900 Dr. George Englemann, the president of the American Gynecology Society, was dramatically describing the whole of woman's life in terms of storm and shipwreck. Assailed by the continual stresses of 'sexual storm', she is battered and crippled by the 'breakers' of puberty, dashed to pieces

on the 'rock' of childbirth, grounded on the 'shallows' of menstruation and washed up on the final sandbar of the menopause.¹⁰

This viewing of woman's every natural function as a life-threatening crisis provided the biological justification which undergirded constructs of femininity in a society which wanted its women to be gentle, delicate and contained in a state of perpetual immaturity and fragility. As Mary Putnam Jacobi, one of the first female physicians in America, claimed in an article written in 1874, refuting the work of a male colleague, 'his arguments are not accepted because they are demonstrable, but enlisted because they are useful'.¹¹

Effect of theory on the upbringing of girls

Girls were brought up in a way which transmuted theory into self-fulfilling prophecy, and this was true from infancy onwards. That there was a connection between the social conditioning of girls and the physical expression allowed to them was clearly perceived, with a mixture of exasperation and amusement, by Frances Dove, founder Head of Wycombe Abbey. Speaking of cricket in 1898 she laments the inability of girls to throw or bowl, and sees this as the result, not of any physiological disability, but of early training, with girls not being allowed physical freedom in the same way as boys. Dove deplores the fact that, even at nursery age, boys are allowed to be rough, noisy and active, while 'the whole force of the nurse's authority is usually exerted to prevent the girls under her charge from falling under the opprobrium, in nursery etiquette, of being "unladylike."'

Dove refers to both boys and girls as 'the young animal', claims that girls who have not been restricted in their childhood throw just as well as boys, and mocks the medical discourse which suggests the contrary; it was claimed by anatomical authorities that the joint of a woman's shoulder was more shallow than a man's, and that she risked dislocating it if she threw a ball with force. 'Thus, comically,' remarks Dove, with irony, 'does preconceived theory upset the scientific vision'.¹²

If small girls were treated differently from small boys, however, the discrepancy accelerated alarmingly as the girl approached womanhood. For a teenage girl, constricting clothing, rigorous diets and negligible exercise were perceived as both normal and fitting, because a girl was more at risk at adolescence than at any other time. For boys, puberty brought strength and vigour, for girls, it spelt prolonged and periodic weakness; whereas previously physical exercise had been good for her, now she must rest and guard her energies. This was seen as an immutable law of nature. Arabella Kenealy, a British doctor at the turn of the century, underscored the differences in female physical behaviour which followed puberty:

'From having been a strong, young, active, boy-like creature, now ... the girl loses physical activity and strength. A phase of invalidation sets in. Instinctively, she no longer runs and romps ... She becomes a complex of disabilities.'¹³

The word 'invalidation' is significant. Kenealy obviously meant it to refer to the state of being an invalid (sick person), but the implication of becoming an invalid (null and void) human being is too strong to be ignored. Woman's 'differentiating and escaping energies' have the door locked upon them by Nature, so that all her energies can be adapted to child-bearing.

A recurrent image in the physical training of girls is that of a plant. No animal energies are allowed her, she must be passive and pliable. 'A girl was trained, as it were, more like a plant than an animal, by fastening her to various sorts of rigid framework', claims Janet Whitcut in *Edgbaston High School, 1876-1976*¹⁴ and Gillian Avery has also unearthed the harrowing experiences of Mary Martha Sherwood (a popular Victorian writer for children) whose father made her translate fifty lines of Virgil every day, standing in stocks to strengthen her back, with an iron collar round her neck.¹⁵

Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, too, speaks of the braces, bars and clamps used to wrench soft bodies into the 'right' shapes, and records the experience of Mrs. Somerville who, on being sent to boarding-school in 1790 at the age of ten, was at once put 'in stiff stays with a steel busk in front, while, above my frock, bars drew my shoulders back till the shoulder blades met. Then a steel rod, with a semi-circle which went under the chin, was clasped to the steel busk in my stays'.¹⁶ Boys also sometimes wore uncomfortable

uniform at school, of course, but there is nothing like this attempt to form, control and subjugate the body.

Theories of finite energy; eugenics and Darwinism

Perhaps less obvious, but equally powerful as a controlling discourse, was the medical theory which claimed that the body was a discrete energy field containing a finite amount of vital energy, and that force expended in one direction would not be available for any other function.¹⁷ The same theorists who assured intellectual women that mental activity shrivelled the uterus claimed that hockey-playing caused a future inability to breast-feed.¹⁸ As the custodian of the race, it was the obvious duty of woman to husband her energies and to direct them towards child-bearing; indeed, a woman who had other priorities in her life was no woman at all. In 1886 Dr. William Withers Moore addressed the British Medical Association on the theme of education for women, propounding the view that the educated woman would be 'more or less sexless', and that humanity would pay for such aberrations with the loss of its sons - 'Bacon, for want of a mother, will not be born'.¹⁹ It was a perception which was to remain prevalent. 'Persons who do not undertake the special function of the sex are of secondary importance', declared Edward Cope in *The Popular Science Monthly* (1888), and G. Stanley Hall, a psychologist studying female development at the turn of the century, defined women who chose education instead of motherhood as 'functionally castrated graduates'(1904).²⁰

With the rise of Darwin's theories of the survival of the fittest and the growth of the eugenics movement (founded by Darwin's cousin Francis Galton), the importance of the health of the mother in bearing the future super-race increased enormously. Reaction against the adoption and implementation of eugenics by Nazi Germany has masked how very widespread the concepts were in pre-War Europe and America, and the fall in the birthrate amongst middle-class women contributed to a feeling of panic. Thus in order to ensure the survival of the species (and the right elements of the species), women had to be controlled, and the most powerful agents of control were genetic theories and theories

of reproduction. In an article in the *British Medical Journal* in 1867, the Obstetrical Society declared of women:

'We are, in fact, the stronger and they the weaker. They are obliged to believe all that we tell them and we, therefore, may be said to have them at our mercy'.²¹

The eugenicist Karl Pearson maintained that 'if child-bearing women must be intellectually handicapped, then the penalty to be paid for race predominance is the subjection of women',²² and Nietzsche claimed that the repression of women was essential for energising the birth struggle, in the same way as butterflies need to struggle out of their chrysalis.²³

Alternative discourse - medical

The first strand of the alternative discourse gradually emerging to challenge dominant modes of thought was a medical one as female doctors, who were themselves in the front line of a challenge to social constructs, gave medical weight to alternative thinking and nurtured the 'germ of a more positive attitude to the female body ... linked to the idea of health and fitness through exercise'.²⁴ Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor in both America and England, averred in 1852 'exercise is the grand necessity which everything else should aid', and urged that exercise should occupy a prominent place in our systems of education. Certainly Blackwell's argument was that girls should care for their bodies so that they could be ideal vessels for motherhood, but she nevertheless advocated the freedom of 'climbing, running, riding, dancing and free play ... freedom from strangling corsets' for girls.

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, who eventually became President of the London School of Medicine for Women and the only woman member of the British Medical Association, told a London School Board candidates' meeting in 1870 that 'physical education was especially necessary for girls', and pressed for games for girls, contending that they were handicapped by social rather than physiological factors. 'A life at a good day-school, with time for fresh air and exercise, is healthier than sitting over the fire with a novel at home', she said.

Finally, Mary Putnam Jacobi completed a research project for Harvard's Boylston Medical Prize in 1893 which demonstrated that menstrual difficulties were connected with *lack* of exercise, and suggested that that systematic exercise as part of the education system was even more necessary for girls than for boys, as boys were so much more likely to get it spontaneously.²⁵

Alternative discourse - the boys' public schools

These alternative medical discourses offered at least some promise of physical release to girls, but even more powerful was the fact that, as Rosemary Auchmuty has pointed out²⁶, as education for girls developed, girls' schools modelled themselves strongly on the boys' public schools. The aim was to demonstrate equality by creating as little difference as possible between the schools, with girls becoming as identical to their brothers as was achievable, and this was symbolised by the playing of organised games. They epitomised the growing educational and social freedom being sought by girls' schools which were aiming at being brisk, energetic, efficient - and athletic.

It was these discourses which caused games for girls to be regarded initially with grave suspicion for, despite the opposing arguments based on health and morality, there was an unconscious (or certainly unavowed) realisation of the threat they presented to the prevailing image of women. The image of the games-player is fundamentally that of the active, successful achiever and team-games are very ambivalent. Certainly they encourage in many ways co-operation and unselfishness, but they can also be seen as aggressive and individualistic, a determination to exist as the subject of one's own narrative. The object of a game is, after all, to win and, in both reality and fiction, the glory is given to the individual who has achieved this - the 'man of the match'. Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, speaking of games in boys' public schools, emphasises their importance as ritual, as a context which can at the same time contain and allow full expression of 'the ambitious individual's intense need to express aggression and achieve success',²⁷ and for Aldous Huxley, a product of the same system, they are nothing less than a substitute for war.²⁸

Mary Jo Festle, an American athlete and academic, questions the more unappealing aspects of sport, 'its potential for violence, authoritarianism, self-destructiveness, inequality, insensitivity and loss of perspective'.²⁹

Many of the early objections to girls playing games were based on this undesirable element of aggression and competitiveness which they encouraged, and which was the antithesis of the selflessness demanded from women. If women competed, the whole concept of separate and complementary spheres of influence and competence would be called into question, and social order and well-being undermined. Even bicycling, which promised such freedom of movement and clothing to women, was condemned for the 'physiological crimes' of excessive speed and competition, and the above-mentioned Arabella Kenealy claimed that forced athletics was ruining the health *and attitudes* of women:

'The spectacle of young women, with *set jaws*, eyes strained tensely on a ball, a *fierce battle-look* gripping their features, their *hands clutching* at some or other instrument, their *arms engaged in striking and beating*, their legs disposed in *coarse, ungainly attitudes*, is an object lesson in all that is ugly in action and unwomanly in mode.'³⁰

The italics are mine, but illustrate the implications of aggression and loss of constructed femininity which so terrified the opponents of games for girls, and which, to quote Kenealy again, was 'subversive of domestic happiness'.

Rejection of constructs of femininity

If domestic happiness depends on women staying meekly within the constructs devised for them by society, Kenealy had a point. Certainly the texts reject many of the external constructs of femininity, and this was perceived at the time as threatening and subversive. That self-sacrifice and self-effacement are the quintessence of femininity and the antithesis of the ethos of sport is made resoundingly clear in a story written by Katherine Newlin and published in the *British Girls' Annual* of 1910, where the rejection of a love of games is proof of the heroine's womanhood.

'Teddy' (Theodora) Carston is sent to boarding-school to cure some of her violently tomboyish ways, and, when she returns home, one of her four brothers is seriously ill. A long-awaited cricket match is scheduled for the afternoon of their nurse's day out, and Teddy, in the middle of dressing to go to the match, overhears George crying with disappointment. Unable to ignore the weariness of Sally, the nurse, or George's distress, Teddy battles with the knowledge that she is going to have to give up what she so much wants, and with the awareness that it is she who must do so, and not any of her brothers, because she is a girl, and girls are not allowed to be selfish. Desperately, she questions the premise:

'And why shouldn't they be? She stamped her foot. She wasn't a little girl. She *wasn't*. She wouldn't be.'

Teddy eventually decides to stay home with George, but the decision is seen entirely in terms of her femininity. Sally is torn between gratitude for this relief for her own exhaustion and fear that Teddy is doing her duty at great personal cost:

' "Are you sure you're not carin' too much about the match?"

"Pooh!" said Teddy stoutly, "*I'm* not a little boy."

Teddy's sacrifice raises her to 'a high and reverent niche' in the hearts of her brothers, and the final apotheosis comes when Captain Carston, on hearing the story, addresses Teddy by the name previously sacred to her dead mother ('this is *my* Theodora'), thus taking her into 'the very innermost chamber of his heart'.³¹

Thus love, acceptance and any power within one's life are won only by denying one's own desires and even interests; Teddy's mother has made the ultimate sacrifice, dying in childbirth, while even Sally's womanhood is defined in total self-giving. And for this Teddy is worshipped, becoming in the process a saintly non-person, all her individuality swamped in negation of self, stripped even of her boy's name, with its connotations of activity and positive subjecthood. The fact that Teddy has to repudiate games to endorse her womanhood is indicative of how powerful an alternative discourse they provided.

The growth in popularity of organised games was allied to the development of 'hoydenish' behaviour which horrified many parents and headmistresses who saw it as an unacceptable abandonment of the female role. Elinor Brent-Dyer's Heather (*Heather*

Leaves School, 1929) is taken away from her well-known public school because of the lowering of its 'tone,' a state of affairs specifically allied to games-playing:

'Ripley prided itself on being athletic, and along with this reputation had arisen among the girls an ambition to be as like their brothers as possible.'

Major Raphael, Heather's father, deeply disapproves of this attitude, mainly because it is confusing his perception of his daughter's gender identity:

'They are in danger of making a little tin god of sport and forgetting everything else.... I... don't want my daughter to grow up into a kind of boy-girl!'³²

Constructs of femininity are specifically opposed to the games ethos, and there is fierce opposition to several of the most common characteristics of what is perceived as the 'feminine'. There is, for example, the attitude to slimming. Given the overwhelming pressures on women to conform to society's concept of an acceptable figure and weight, it is interesting that very serious consequences are reserved for tubby girls who deny nature by trying to slim, and these consequences are invariably seen when a situation arises which shows that the character has made herself incapable of effective physical activity.

A combination of continual overdoses of slimming pills and near-starvation affects Lindsay Sutherland's heart in Olive Dougan's *Tubby of Maryland Manor* (1945), and she almost dies after a strenuous swim undertaken to save a younger girl who is in difficulties³³. Raymond Jacbern's Judith (*Tabitha Smallways, Schoolgirl*, 1912)³⁴, becomes ill as a result of poisoning herself by continually drinking vinegar, and is almost expelled for stealing mustard pickle from the school larder. Nancy Breary's Barbara (*A School Divided*, 1944)³⁵ is finally affected by anaemia and undernourishment, which is discovered only when she collapses on the cricket field, causing the school to lose the match. Again the antithesis between games and constructs of femininity is total. In the same book, make-up is derided and the shallowness of the renegade Trixie is revealed when she is discovered manicuring her nails when she is supposed to be fielding at long-stop.

For Angela Brazil, traditional femininity is passive, spineless and sentimental, and she, too, uses games as an antidote. Cynthia Greene falls in love with a soldier and languishes

until teased out of it by the Games Prefect, who confiscates her Poems of Love and substitutes instead a Manual of Cricket with the comment, 'I'm not going to have all those Juniors wandering about the garden reading poetry instead of practising their cricket - it's not good enough!'³⁶

Games are the total antidote to constructs of femininity, for, in sport, women claim as their own traditional 'masculine' activities, rejecting totally any concept of ladylike behaviour:

'They shove, sweat, strain, flex, groan, take large strides across open spaces, prioritise their own pleasure and even, occasionally, receive applause for their accomplishments, regardless of their physical beauty.'³⁷

Games are empowerment and, to continue to quote Nelson, 'inexorably change everything'.

Moral function of games

Physical health and images of active women were only half the story, however, for, in the boys' schools, the playing of games had taken on an importance quite unconnected with physical activity, as it became mythologised as the vehicle and arbiter of morality.

A belief in the efficacy of games in moral reclamation is a reflection of the aspirations of actual girls' schools. Miss Dove, the founder Head of Wycombe Abbey, after recognising the value of games for developing powers of organisation and rapidity of thought and action, makes a strong plea for their moral value, too, as they inculcate:

'good temper under trying circumstances, courage and determination to play up and do your best even in a losing game ... and above all things, unselfishness, and a knowledge of corporate action, learning to sink individual preferences in the effort of loyally working with others for the common good'.³⁸

Lucy Soulsby, the Headmistress of the Oxford High School, goes even further, claiming that most of the qualities which make England supreme in the world are developed by means of games (1898).³⁹

These idealistic expectations are common to many of the books. In Sybil Owsley's *Dulcie Captains The School* (1928) the Head Girl encourages a form's interest in games when their mark-grabbing becomes too vicious,⁴⁰ and the moral content of games is stressed very strongly in Ethel Talbot's *Patricia, Prefect* (1925). In this book the new girl, Veronica, is stigmatised as 'ungamesy', and this judgment is validated, not because she is incompetent (she is in fact very good), but because the moral attitude of her play is wrong. Pat, the heroine of the title and the Games Prefect, sends her off the field during a match, not for a technical foul, but because she has been playing a selfish game, striving for personal glory.⁴¹

May Wynne has the same emphasis; in her *Playing The Game* (1947) it is symbolically the new Games Mistress who brings standards of truth, fairness and honour to a lax and undisciplined school. 'Playing the game' became the description of a whole philosophy of life based on the same qualities of fairness, effort and unselfishness as were supposedly exemplified on the games field - 'future Englishmen learn their manhood at the wickets, and grow up and carry it with them to the ends of the world'.⁴²

Effect of masculine paradigm on girls

That 'Englishmen' learned their 'manhood' through games is significant. The public school ethic was a structure created by men for boys and, in games as with most other aspects of education, girls were expected to fit into the slots already provided. Where this particular aspect was concerned, this meant becoming a 'gentleman' and was, as Rosemary Auchmuty has stated, a package which was 'genuinely believed to be the best available'.⁴³

In some ways there was no alternative available construct. Auchmuty has suggested that the role of women as guardians of society's morality made it easier for girls to adopt the schoolboy code, but the whole area is fraught with ambivalence as, despite the undoubted truth of this, women's own moral fibre was simultaneously seen as almost non-existent. The foundation of these assumptions were theological and the concept of essential female moral weakness had been strong since the early church fathers. The

writings of St. Paul were (and are still, in some circles) interpreted as saying that women were more easily deceived than men. Paul, writing to Timothy, claims that 'It was not Adam who was deceived; it was the woman who, yielding to deception, fell into sin' (1Tim. 2:14) and goes on to speak of false teachers who 'get silly women into their clutches, women burdened with sins and carried away by all kinds of desires, always wanting to be taught, but incapable of attaining to a knowledge of the truth' (2Tim 3:6,7). Thus the dominant discourse of power for many centuries had held that moral instability was the hallmark of women.

With this background it was a genuine liberation to be allowed into the paradigm of masculine morality, but only the boyish girls are truly able to enter and become honorary men. Both Elinor Brent-Dyer's Tom (Lucinda Muriel) Gay and Phyllis Matthewman's Tony Falconer spend their early lives strongly influenced by their fathers, and arrive at school having been convinced by them that their schoolfellows will be dishonourable, sentimental and obsessed with their appearance. For, while 'being a gentleman' is concerned with moral fibre and noble conduct, being a 'lady' means little more than dressing and behaving in ways which society finds acceptable for women, using slang, slamming doors, whistling and wearing trousers being the ultimate in unladylike conduct. Mr Gay's final words to his daughter are: 'before everything else, I want you to be a gentleman. Never descend to an ungentlemanly act, whatever you do.'⁴⁴

Ultimately the attitude towards the concept is ambivalent. The Chalet School exists, of course, to prove Mr. Gay's preconceptions wrong, and to reverse his and Tom's perceptions of femininity, yet Tom's straightforwardness and honesty are accorded a respect which does in fact imply that they are somewhat unusual in a girl, and the final verdict cannot go beyond the contention that girls can be 'gentlemen' too - nobility and morality are still defined in predominantly masculine terms:

"You know," [Daisy] said soberly, "whatever else her folk may or may not have done for her, they've rubbed generosity and decent feeling into Tom Gay. To quote herself, she's a real gentleman!"⁴⁵

Despite this adoption of the masculine paradigm of morality, however, the participants are not male, and this causes a distancing process, some sort of basic disaffection and

alienation, a crack in the ideology. Part of the distancing process was, in fact, an exclusion, for men did not actually want women to trespass on their domain. This is illustrated in the fluctuating fortunes of football as a game for girls.

Football was popular in the early girls' schools, being adopted with enthusiasm by small schools which could not provide enough pupils for a cricket or hockey team, but its span of acceptability was short-lived. Even in 1898 Lucy Soulsby was describing the game as being 'quite out of the question because of its roughness',⁴⁶ and even very modern school-stories express their heroines' strivings towards independence in terms of being allowed to play football, thus gaining entrance into one of the last of the male bastions (the game is described by a football coach as 'the last bastion of male domination'⁴⁷) and participating in the most cherished rites of male bonding.

Gillian Cross's Clipper (*Save Our School*, 1983), who is a West Indian girl, is much better at football than her male friends, and in fact the class loses a vital match because Clipper's mother (condoning and perpetuating the oppression which she has internalised), refuses to allow her to indulge in such boyish activities. Clipper is forced to watch in anguish from the sidelines wearing, to complete the indignity, a skirt.⁴⁸ Clipper is still at primary school, but the secondary school-girls in Anne Digby's Trebizon School discover in *Hockey Term* (1984) that the new girl, Fiona, has been sneaking off to play football on the beach with the Trebizon Colts, as at home she is a keen member of a women's football team, the Burton Bluebells. Fiona, too, has her activities curtailed, though her talents are used when she comes into her own as kicking full-back for the Seven-a-Side Hockey Tournament - but it is difficult for a girl to be a 'real' footballer.⁴⁹

Despite the frustrations inherent in this ambivalent position, the place of distance became a place of power, for, whereas in boys' schools games stood unchallenged as the pivot of the universe, many authors of stories for girls were able to question and subvert the whole concept. The gap in the construct provides the possibility of analysis and deconstruction of the prevailing and all-embracing ethic, the freedom to internalise the parts that are useful and reject the rest. This is seen in two ways, in a questioning of the primary importance of games and in an analysis of the moral implications.

Deconstruction - Games as mere enjoyment

Even in the heyday of games obsession there were those who rebelled against the 'worship of brawn and muscle,'⁵⁰ and a large number of authors always refused to see in games anything more than healthy enjoyment - and sometimes not even that. Even in 1929 one of Christine Chaundler's characters was proclaiming that she liked games, but was not 'cracked' about them;⁵¹ in *Felgarth's Last Year* (1938) games-loving Chris decrees that, while games are all right, it is silly to talk about them all the time,⁵² and at Hilary's new school, Merevaile (*Hilary Follows Up*, 1939), 'parents ... were sending their girls to other schools, where school life was not primarily looked upon from the angle of prowess on the playing field'.⁵³ Because the basic structure of the school-story remained the same until its fall from popularity in the Sixties, the same attitudes span several decades. For some of the girls at St. Kelvev's (*St. Kelvev's Launches Out*, 1962) hockey is only a stage, and not a particularly enjoyable one at that.⁵⁴

The two attitudes are neatly contrasted in Margaret Biggs' *Susan In The Sixth* (1955). Miss Johns, the Games Mistress, treats school hockey with the traditional reverence, but the outlook of the girls themselves is very different. Even Pamela, the Games Prefect, is amused at Miss Johns' seriousness and realises that her friends are unlikely to be impressed by the mistress's insistence on the importance of winning the next match. They are merely bored by this over-dramatization of something which they consider trivial:

'four winters' play under the unflagging Miss Johns had damped most of [Susan's] interest.'⁵⁵

Games versus academic, artistic and spiritual values

More serious objections were made by many authors to the all-pervasive games-cult. The most obvious of these is that excessive interest in games interferes with work. Ethel Talbot's *St Kilda's* (*Jean's Two Schools*, 1930) tries to stand out against the prevalent addiction;

'St. Kilda's at its inception had set itself against being an "All Games" school.... St Kilda's tried to keep the balance.'⁵⁶

Even so they do not entirely succeed, and Jean, as Head Girl, is horrified to realise that the library has been unused for weeks because of the juniors' keenness over hockey.⁵⁷ Dorita Fairlie Bruce's Miss Yorke almost causes a rebellion at Jane's when, arriving as their new Head, she cuts down their games time in favour of lessons,⁵⁸ and Elinor Brent-Dyer uses the same theme. As late as *Two Sams At The Chalet School*, Upper 1Vb is stigmatised as 'games-crazy' and 'mentally lazy' because they put all their energies into sport and consequently neglect their work.⁵⁹ Their form-mistress is changed to a games enthusiast so that the girls cannot accuse her of being unsympathetic and anti-sport when she cuts their games periods for badly done work.

In fact the obsession with games was deeply insidious in its effects, for it became a religion and was, like most religions, deeply controlling. It could be argued that it was used as an agent to force the conformity deeply ingrained in both boys' and girls' schools; it undoubtedly led to a philistinism which scorned intellectual excellence and derided artistic talent.

The girls in *Patricia, Prefect* (1925) speak of a girl who plays the violin as 'likely to have one shoulder higher than the other and flaccid muscles'.⁶⁰ Veronica happens to play both hockey and her violin unusually well, but the feeling that a girl was worthless if she was not athletically inclined, whatever her capabilities in other directions, was widespread.

This gave rise to an athletic elitism which was positively cruel in its effects, for it led to the total isolation of the 'ungamesy'. Margaret goes to St. Olave's from a small Scottish village where she has had no opportunity to play team games (though she is an excellent golfer) and finds herself very much on the outside. The girls can find no point of contact with her ('what could one talk about to a girl who could not play games?') and Margaret finds out 'how much out of things a girl feels at school who does not play games'.⁶¹

Again in Nancy Breary's *It Was Fun In The Fourth*, one of the reasons for Diana's isolation and friendlessness is that, in a school 'where efficiency and keenness about

games were the chief passports to popularity',⁶² she is not interested in sport. Indeed, a friendly Senior encourages her to pretend violent enthusiasm as a means of making contact with her form-mates.⁶³

If the philistinism connected with games made light of intellectual values, there was also a fear that it would deny spiritual values and breed materialism. This is a favourite theme of Ethel Talbot, in whose work games often interfere with the girls' perceptions of 'higher things.' Unfortunately it is never quite clear what these are, but they tend to come in the form of visionary gleams to those who are not too games-besotted to receive them, and this is true even in *Girls of the Rookery School* in which games are exalted almost into a holy rite.

This conflict forms the basis of *Nancy, New Girl* (1930). Nancy, who is very proficient at games, has to change schools after her father's death, and refuses to play at all because games are clouding her perceptions. However, by the end of the book she has become integrated enough to play again - and, indeed, has one of her 'moments' during a hockey match.⁶⁴ Ethel Talbot's somewhat visionary style is an uneasy medium for a school-story, and the point is overstated. Nevertheless, a valid point is made; that games, though useful and enjoyable as part of life, have limitations, and do not include within themselves enough elements to be seen as the whole of life.

Analysis and deconstruction of the public school ethic

For the boys' schools, 'playing the game' had been built up into a powerful and very specific discourse with clearly identifiable moral components. These were adopted whole-heartedly by both girls' schools and girls' fiction, but the adoption was never uncritical, and in fact the texts provide meaningful analysis of both the broad ethic and the specific concepts.

Many women authors recognise that behaviour on the games field, rather than forming morality, is directed by pre-existent moral responses. In E.L.Haverfield's *Girls Of St. Olave's* (1919)⁶⁵ and Margaret Irvine's *School Enemy* (1925)⁶⁶ there is bitter games

rivalry; relations with teams from opposing schools are anything but cordial, and the girls deeply resent losing a match.

The realisation that games do not, after all, convert girls into instant seraphim is crystallised by Evelyn Smith in *Phyllida in Form Three* (1927). Phyllida is herself an excellent hockey-player, and her discovery that a new girl whom she despises and detests is equally competent brings for her a moment of disillusionment which encapsulates the naivete of the expectations:

"I didn't know," said Phyllida, "that anyone who played games well *could* be irritating."⁶⁷

The specific concepts of the 'public school ethic' are well-known. In order to 'play the game', one must never 'sneak'; one must own up to one's misdeeds; victory must be accepted with humility and defeat with cheerfulness; one must be loyal to one's friends, house and school, and duty must always be done. A clear example of the way in which these concepts were simultaneously adopted and redefined in books for girls is the attitude to sneaking. Certainly girls who sneak receive short shrift from both classmates and school authorities, yet it is obvious that there are occasions when the authorities should be informed of what is happening, and when promises should be broken, otherwise atrocious wrong may exist and be allowed to continue.

This is clearly shown, albeit in terms of farce, in J. Radford-Evans' *The Hoax of a Lifetime* (1939), which, although quite ludicrous, graphically questions the validity of the undeconstructed ethic. Here, Doris, the 'black sheep of the Fourth', develops into a homicidal maniac and forces the heroine, at the point of a red-hot poker, to jump to her death from her study window. Brenda is saved by the ivy, and re-enters the study just as her friends have finished beating Doris unconscious with a cricket-bat. The girls suggest that the whole episode should be reported to the Head, but Brenda will have none of it, and reduces the whole ethic to nonsense with the inimitable comment: 'No, I'm not going to tell Muggy ... We can't go round splitting about everything that happens.'⁶⁸

More serious authors do provide meaningful analysis. Elsie Oxenham's Retta Garnet is expelled from her French school because she insists on owning up to her misdeeds and refuses to sneak on her less fastidious companions (*Expelled From School*, 1919), but her

point of view is not totally accepted. Retta's aunt tries to make her see that she is causing positive moral harm to those she is shielding.⁶⁹

Not sneaking can be a positive disadvantage to the victim. In Winifred Darch's *Katherine Goes to School* (1925), Katherine is boycotted because she is suspected of having stolen her rival's examination essay, and her form-mistress berates the girls for cruelty in a situation where they would not 'sneak', but let rumours circulate, making their victim much more miserable than if she had been reported to the authorities and had the charges fairly examined.⁷⁰

More serious and much more disturbing is the powerful conflict in Rosemary Wells' *The Fog Comes on Little Pig Feet* (1976) as Rachel tries to decide whether it is right to tell the school authorities the whereabouts of a girl who has run away. Rachel, herself deperately miserable under the restrictions of boarding-school life, understands and totally identifies with Carlisle's desire for freedom, yet the school claims that the runaway girl is disturbed, and a danger both to herself and to others. Rachel finally gives her Headmistress the address on impulse rather than as a result of a reasoned decision, and is left never knowing whether she has betrayed or saved Carlisle.⁷¹

Moral autonomy and personal responsibility for women

The stress, above all, is on personal responsibility, and on taking the consequences of one's own actions, and this, for girls, was particularly important. The girls in the texts are capable of, and responsible for, their own moral choices. They are not morally unstable, they are not vacillating creatures who need others to take decisions for them, they are responsible for their own behaviour, and, indeed, are not allowed to avoid the consequences, however unpleasant. There is a fierce campaign against the 'bad old instinct all human beings share, the instinct to find a scapegoat for personal misfortune for which one is personally responsible.'⁷²In E.C. Matthews' *Miss Honor's Form* (1928), the girls inadvertently ruin Prudence's school hat, and go to her grandparents to offer to buy her a new one. They are allowed to do it, not because the adults mind about

the cost of the hat, but because they are glad to see that the girls are not trying to evade the consequences of their actions.⁷³

Elinor Brent-Dyer, too, stresses the fact that one cannot escape responsibility. In *Feud in the Fifth Remove*⁷⁴ (1949), Lotty Harsnet is warned by her father that if she is involved in any more trouble at school, she will be taken away and sent to a strict boarding-school. Lotty does her best to stay on the path of virtue, but finally the taunts and jibes of Brenda Lowe prove too much for her, and she joins in a very ill-fated strike. Her father fulfils his threat, and many of the girls feel strongly that the fault is Brenda's rather than Lotty's. However, Brent-Dyer will not excuse her. She has been at fault in not having the courage to follow her own conscience - in Jack Maynard's words, 'no-one can *make* you commit sin. It's up to you to refuse or agree'.⁷⁵ Val Gardiner, in *Redheads at the Chalet School*, tries to excuse herself for having been kidnapped (one of Brent-Dyer's less inspired moments), but the Head will have none of it; it was Valerie's fault for breaking rules and thus putting herself in a position where she could be captured: 'it was your own fault from beginning to end and you are the only one to blame.'⁷⁶

Thus we have in the texts active, responsible, self-owning heroines who make it possible to redefine femininity completely as women who have been kept in a state of dependence and everlasting minority are allowed to grow up.

Differences of attitude in modern authors

The move away from the perception of games as the hallowed centre of physical and moral existence is illustrated in the treatment of the subject in the books of a very modern writer, Anne Digby. Her *Trebizon* series is quite strongly games-based in that Rebecca Mason, the central character, discovers an unexpected and exceptional talent for tennis, and several of her friends are excellent hockey players. Anne Digby takes into account the hard training required for proficiency, and Rebecca's climb to the top is by no means effortless. Naturally she wins matches, but not all of them, and because her success is not inevitable there is real tension and suspense in each match situation. The

organisation of county tennis is portrayed with great accuracy, but the technicalities of the actual matches are never laboured and we are told only of those moments which directly contribute to the result - and even the difficult logistics of constantly ferrying youngsters to matches all over the county are recognised.

Games have to be balanced against other things; Sue Murdoch, a good hockey-player, has to give up her chance of being in the school team because she is working for a Music Scholarship and cannot spare the time for intensive practice in both.

The first *Trebizon* story was published in 1978 and the difference in the attitude to games is striking. There is no exaltation, no moral implication, the straight and dauntless heroine leading her side to glory is dead - even the choice of tennis as Rebecca's talent presupposes a largely one-person activity. Digby can reject the cliché only because it has done its work. There is no longer any need to convince anyone that women are independent moral beings, and the image of the wounded woman is no longer relevant. School-stories played a large part in re-creating the image and in providing for girls, through games, focalizers who were both active, successful achievers and morally autonomous human beings, again offering liberating images and the possibility of constituting women as the subjects of their own discourse.

Conclusion

We have seen how the lives of women and girls have been restricted by the curtailment of their activities, justified by medical discourses which were in themselves inaccurate and which served only to direct all female energies towards motherhood. These theories were challenged by an alternative medical discourse which presented physical activity as life-giving rather than life-threatening, and also by the need for girls' schools to approximate as nearly as possible to the boys' public schools, which prioritised and idealised games.

This was in many ways a process of empowerment, allowing girls to escape from societal constructs of femininity, but it carried with it the danger of girls being assimilated into a masculine paradigm and losing all authenticity themselves.

This is avoided by considerable depth of analysis and deconstruction of the male ethic, and this takes place with regard to the adulation of games and also to the immense moral mythology with which they were associated. Because girls were allowed to enter the masculine construct, they gained the ability to be seen as adult, autonomous moral beings; because they did not entirely fit the construct, they were able to maintain enough distance to carry out the same process of analysis, to keep what was useful and discard the rest.

Once again the texts are presenting us with liberating images of women as physically and morally strong and active, able to take charge of their own lives and to live as the subject of their own story.

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- 29 Fletcher, *Women First*, p.26
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- 41 Mary Jo Festle, *Playing Nice : Politics and Apologies in Women's Sports*,
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- 48 Olive Dougan, *Tubby of Maryland Manor* (London and Glasgow : Blackie &
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- 38 quoted in Celia Haddon, *Great Days and Jolly Days* (London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), p.63
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- 45 Brent-Dyer, *Tom Tackles the Chalet School*, p.140
- 46 Soulsby, *At Work and at Play*
- 47 Nelson, *The Stronger Women Get The More Men Love Football*, p.126
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The difficulties girls still have to face are illustrated by a report in the *Times Educational Supplement* of March 1st 1996 (p.13) of an incident in a girls' football tournament when the male manager of one team stopped the game and demanded a gender check on a fourteen year-old player on the opposing team because she was playing so well.
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- 73 E.C.Matthews, *Miss Honor's Form* London and Glasgow : Blackie and Son, 1928), p.47
- 74 Brent-Dyer, *Feud in the Fifth Remove* (London : Lutterworth Press, 1949. First published Girls' Own Paper 1931)
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Chapter Six : My God -It's the Head!

The God-Woman : Images of Deity and Re-Visions of Power in the Texts.

Introduction

At the time when most school-stories were written, Britain would have defined itself as a Christian country, with religious structures having a much greater cultural importance than is now the case. Religious training for the young was considered essential, chapel was (and is) an integral part of boarding-school life, so it is not surprising that some sort of religious experience is fundamental to many of the texts. The practical outworking of the theme, however, has many variations. While many writers were content to pay lip-service to established beliefs, others used their books purely as vehicles for their message, and attempted to convert their readers. By contrast, several of the major writers in the field, including Elinor Brent-Dyer, Dorita Fairlie Bruce and Elsie Oxenham, were deeply committed Christians, and their beliefs cannot avoid being reflected in the texts. These authors have been criticised for a simplistic and sentimental attitude to religion, but such an attitude is itself myopic. All give their readers profound, rigorous and honest analyses of the problems of faith in terms which they can understand and with which they can identify, and Elinor Brent-Dyer, because of the phenomenal length of her writing life (1922-1969), had to deal with adapting her work to a society which no longer accepted her beliefs as axiomatic. This she achieved by means of apologetics, but achieve it she certainly did.

All this is crystal clear from the most cursory reading of the texts. Less obvious, but of crucial importance, is the way in which the combination of the woman-centred world of the school-story and these strong religious elements culminates in perceptions of spiritual possibilities for women which are strikingly unusual and deeply empowering.

Prayer in Despair

For almost every author, religion is very definitely there; however unorthodox their personal beliefs it was essential to make the right noises, and God is always in the

background, there to help if needed. Angela Brazil, herself a conscientious if pantheistic Anglican, illustrates the principle in many of her books. Muriel and Patty, for example, are dramatically reminded of this background faith when they are threatened with death by drowning (*Nicest Girl In The School*). Muriel questions Patty's lack of fear, is reminded by the other girl that God can look after them whatever the circumstances, and joins her in a familiar prayer:

' "Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, and by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night."

How often they had repeated the familiar collect in church or at evening prayers in the big schoolroom at The Priory, sometimes with little thought for its meaning; and how different it sounded now in the midst of the real peril and danger that surrounded them.'¹

Mary Louise Parker's Amy and her brother are in trouble of a different kind, but the remedy is the same:

'Judith and I have agreed to remember you and Robert in our prayers every night. You do, too, I expect, and you know there's a text in the Bible about people agreeing to pray about anything and Mummy says God gives us what we ask for if it is for our good. So don't worry, is what she would say, just trust Him.'²

For these authors, prayer is very much a last resort. They presumably meant what they said, it would be unwarrantable to suppose otherwise, but prayer is *only* a support in trouble. It is in no way integral to the life of the characters, and the deletion of the above passages would certainly make no difference to the rest of the book. Turning to God in desperation is neither an uncommon nor an unrealistic reaction (and Elinor Brent-Dyer's Jo and Grizel also use the 'Lighten Our Darkness' collect as they enter the caves where the madman has hidden Cornelia in *Head Girl of the Chalet School*),³ but Dorita Fairlie Bruce, herself a devout and committed Christian, highlights in her books the lack of impact of this very formalised and peripheral religion. The younger girls at Jane's are only too eager to escape the chapel ritual - indeed, Molly, plaiting her hair to make it curl, rejoices in the prospect that it might 'frizz'; "'perhaps she'll say it's so bad I mustn't go to church", said Molly hopefully. "She might, you know. And I've got such a lovely book out of the Junior library"''.⁴

The same girls pray fervently during Dimsie's illness later in the book, but again this is little more than desperation. Indeed, in *Captain of Springdale*, Peggy is bitterly attacked by her fellow-seniors for taking seriously Sunday's sermon and applying it to the very undesirable atmosphere in the school; her attempts to relate theology to everyday life are embarrassing and almost shocking:

'Church was church and school was school, and people didn't mix them - except the Head in her Scripture lessons, and even that was held by some to be taking an unfair advantage. To be kindly affectioned one to another didn't mean that you were not to criticize people's peculiarities, or try to find out what they'd done to be deprived of a prefectship.'⁵

This attitude is very different from Elinor Brent-Dyer's. Certainly her girls find it difficult to talk to others about their deep faith. Mary-Lou, when called upon to justify her faith, 'made a big effort ... for she was speaking of things that lay deep down and she rarely talked of them, even to her nearest and dearest',⁶ and Rosemary, in *Leader in Spite of Herself*, has to force herself to encourage younger girls to pray for an unpleasant classmate: 'Rosemary flushed, but she knew now what she must say and though she found it hard, she spoke up sturdily.'⁷

When the girls do challenge their school-fellows, however, there is always a positive response and a basic acceptance of their credo which is not found in Dorita Fairlie Bruce's approach. Very similar to Peggy's situation is Rosemary's attempt to impress on her juniors the link between their religious observance and the reality of their everyday lives: 'Here you've just come from church. We had a sermon on love and on trying to imitate the way Christ was a Friend to all His friends, and you deliberately propose to treat another girl in *the* most unfriendly way anyone could imagine!'. The reaction to this is not embarrassment or horror, but a schoolgirl equivalent of conviction and repentance - 'she had given them plenty to think about. No more was ever heard of that wonderful plan'.⁸

Born Again Christians

If religion is to mean anything at all it must be more than socially acceptable external form, and the opposite extreme is provided by a group of authors of evangelical beliefs, with the emphasis on personal contact with God in repentance and conversion. This is certainly a much more fundamental and challenging human experience; however, the books are written expressly to convert and the message matters much more than the story, with the result that the plot is trivial and the characters give little opportunity for focalization.

Elinor Brent-Dyer herself made at least token gestures in this direction. *Beechy of the Harbour School* (1955), *Nesta Steps Out* (1954) and *Leader in Spite of Herself* (1956) were written for Oliphants, a religious press, and my own copies of *Nesta* and *Leader* were given respectively as prizes for Sunday School attendance and for gaining the highest number of points at a Girls' Brigade camp. The Sunday School in question was at the Glad Tidings Gospel Hall, an Assemblies of God church in Hull, and certainly nothing which was not impeccably evangelical would have found its way into such an establishment. However, Brent-Dyer was incapable of producing a mere tract, and, although the religious content of the books is certainly less diluted than in the *Chalet* series, it is expressed in very human terms of girls struggling for victory over their own negative characteristics. *Nesta* has to overcome a violent temper, Rosemary her diffidence and shyness, while *Beechy* has both to come to terms with the death of her mother and conquer her reluctance to own publicly her new-found faith.

These can hardly be counted as Brent-Dyer's most successful books, yet she still creates characters with whom the reader can identify. In contrast, Dorothy Dennison, a fairly prolific author in this field, provides a graphic illustration of the principle that the creation of strong plot and characters varies in direct proportion to the text's evangelistic message. Miss Dennison is a very competent writer, and her *Rebellion Of The Upper Fifth*⁹ is a delightful account of a mistress's battle with a form who idolised her predecessor and are unwilling to accept her. It is both funny and acutely observed, the situation is well-controlled and the reader identifies with the characters, but it is noticeable that the evangelistic content, though present, is very slight. Sliding down the scale a little is *Rival Schools At Trentham*; the humour is still in evidence, and the girls'

lofty ideals of social service are brought down to earth with a bump by aggressive children and parents who grab all that they can get and then complain about it, leaving the girls in a 'disturbed state of disillusionment'. In this book, however, the message is more strongly given and Marigold, the heroine, reaches the perfection seemingly inseparable from committed Christianity. Marvellously popular and sporting, Marigold has been at the school only a few weeks before she retrieves the fortunes of the netball team:

'For when the whistle sounded time, against the one goal scored by Ravenscourt, there were twenty-six scored by Tudor House. And of these, twenty had been scored by Marigold Marshall..... By the time Marigold Marshall had been at Tudor House a month, she was the most popular girl in the school.... [she] was elected a member of the first netball team, and also showed signs of easily getting in the first hockey eleven.¹⁰

It is only fair to add that it is Marigold's insistence on attending a Bible Class with girls from the school which is Tudor House's bitter rival which almost shakes this state of affairs. She is even sent to Coventry for a while, but reacts with Christian forbearance, and the episode ends in the wholesale conversion of the hockey team. For the most part, Marigold remains completely lifeless, a puppet of doctrine - and one does wonder whether it is absolutely necessary for every child who becomes a committed Christian to become an overseas missionary.

Miss Dennison's books are noticeably better the further away she strays from her message, but she is still amongst the best of the post-Victorian evangelical authors. Dennison was writing in the 1920s, and several of her Victorian predecessors show genuine and deep insight into the spiritual thought-processes of young girls,¹¹ but by the 1950s the standard is consistently low, reaching rock-bottom in the books of Helen Humphries. The heroine of *Prudence Goes Too Far* (1966) declares:

'My Dad could not make me do what I did not want to do, and you are only a servant in my Grandfather's house. Ha, ha, wasn't it funny to hear Grandfather on the rampage about those hot water taps, and it was such an easy thing to do, mph, they are just made for japing...'¹²

After nearly a hundred and thirty pages in this vein, one feels that Prudence cannot go far enough.

It is ironic that authors who are attempting to give their readers something of fundamental and eternal importance cannot do so in terms of ordinary experience or even language. Humphries' Margaret (*Margaret The Rebel* 1957) who also, inevitably, becomes a missionary, prays for help before an important hockey match: 'ere the game started she lifted her heart to her Heavenly Father for His help and strength for this task now before her'.¹³

Praying for help in an everyday task is perfectly valid, but one doubts whether a fourteen year-old is really likely to do so in Authorized Version English. This removal of religious experience from the plane of everyday existence is inexcusable in authors who claim that such experience is the mainspring of life, and must do much more harm than good to the message they are trying to convey. We have already seen that Brent-Dyer's specifically evangelical books are not flawed in this particular way, but it is interesting that they, too, were published in the late Fifties. All the texts give the impression of dating from an earlier period, and this was perhaps part of a rear-guard action as children's literature became much more secular and as the country moved into the 'permissive' and anti-church Sixties.

Faith for Living

By far the most successful authors are those who can be classified as religious writers only in the sense that a relationship with God is so fundamental to their lives that it cannot avoid being reflected in their work, and who think, not in terms of theological formulae, but of a living relationship with a real Person. Dorita Fairlie Bruce, Elsie Oxenham and Elinor Brent-Dyer all come into this category; none of these authors is writing solely to put forward a message, but their own deeply-held convictions about the meaning of life are inevitably present in their books. The faith of all these women is certainly simple; simplistic, however, it is not, as religious concepts are rigorously

analysed. There is also absolute commitment, and this is worked out in the texts in the reaction of the characters to difficult and distressing events in their own lives.

Elinor Brent-Dyer's Mary-Lou Trelawney is comforted after the death of her mother by the words of Job quoted by Miss Annersley, her former Headmistress, 'though He slay me, yet will I trust Him',¹⁴ and several of the major characters symbolize their total self-giving concretely. Robin Humphries becomes a nun, Margot Maynard a medical missionary and when, in *New House At The Chalet School*, the girls hear that a former pupil, Luigia de Ferrara, has entered a convent, 'it seemed to Jo that if some of the elder ones had husbands and children, Luigia had taken an even greater step forward than they'.¹⁵ It might be noted that this taking of the veil in no way implies a sentimental retreat from life; Luigia eventually dies, with others of her Order, in a Nazi concentration camp.

This deeply-rooted faith is expressed very much in relation to the practicalities of everyday living. This is reflected even in fictional churches, for the ideal is always 'a short service with plenty of hymns and a ten-minutes' sermon full of common-sense.' Both Dorita Fairlie Bruce and Elinor Brent-Dyer speak of God, and relationships with him, in terms which, particularly for their generation, are startlingly down-to-earth. The former's Desda Blackett declares that:

'There are occasions when a sense of common decency and good manners should drive one to church, if all higher motives are missing. The Lord puts us under such tremendous obligations that we have to do something in return, however small.'¹⁶

God is a friend and should be treated with common courtesy, and Brent-Dyer frequently uses the concept of being 'rude to God'. When in *Joey And Co. In Tirol*, Ruey Richardson attempts to go to bed after a tiring day without saying her prayers, Len Maynard remarks:

'...as for prayers, you must please yourself, but I think you'll be jolly ungrateful if you don't even say a 'Thank you' to God after the decent time you've had today. Rotten bad manners I call it!'¹⁷

For these writers and their characters, religion is deeply related to ordinary life - God is *not* merely there to call on when balanced on a precipice or drowning in a cave.

Because the books contain adventure elements, characters do find themselves in such predicaments, and certainly pray for help when in danger, but their faith is also very much involved in the fabric of everyday living. Miss Annersley, the Headmistress of Brent-Dyer's Chalet School, prays before tackling difficult pupils and Mary-Lou Trelawney, as Head Girl of the school, does likewise before trying to help a younger girl to face her step-sister's imminent death.¹⁸ Even the treatment of erring pupils follows the theologically impeccable path of realisation of wrongdoing leading to repentance and ultimate forgiveness. Elsie Oxenham's Mary Devine struggles to bring her life into line with God's will, and D.F.Bruce's Nancy discourses at some length on predestination and fatalism, but these abstract theological problems, however fascinating to adults, are hardly likely to grip or inspire a child.

Brent-Dyer's strength in this area is that she can talk of profound subjects in concrete, illustrative terms which a child can appreciate; Jo Maynard, for example, encourages her stormy daughter, Margot, to fight her 'devil' in terms of tennis practice:

'every time you give in to the devil, you're making it easier and easier for him to talk to you and coax you into doing things even when you know them to be wrong. It's like practising your tennis. When you first began, you couldn't get a ball over the net unless you stood quite close to it. But you worked at it and now you can get it over quite well, even from the back line. Do you see? ... Whichever you practise hardest now, you'll go on doing when you're older.'¹⁹

Again, when Mary-Lou is trying to explain to jealous Jessica that real love is willing to share, she uses very down-to-earth Biblical examples, reminding the girl how the first reaction of the disciples to gaining the Lord's friendship was to go and tell their friends about him : 'when Christ made friends all round ... did the Apostles go sulking round about it and say and think He ought to be satisfied with them? ... they were maddest with the people who wouldn't have anything to do with Him - like those Samaritans that James and John wanted to call down fire from Heaven on.'²⁰

Because of their trust in a God who is involved in every part of life, these authors can deal with difficult and sometimes untouchable subjects. Death, a difficult concept for

post-Victorian children, is never ignored, but the attitude towards it is one of utmost confidence. Bruce's Triffeny refuses to go and look at her dead great-aunt;

'I'd hate you to think me unfeeling or anything but you see - I just don't believe in death - especially where Great-aunt is concerned. She was always so extremely alive, and she is still, only now she's quite well and happy and able for all the new experiences she has gone into. I can't help feeling that - that what's lying there is just the old clothes she's slipped out of.... We care for them because she has worn them, but otherwise they are of no great importance now.'²¹

Elinor Brent-Dyer even allows occasional characters to contemplate suicide - only to reject the idea firmly as cowardice. In the *Chalet* series, Grizel Cochrane is returning home from New Zealand bitterly unhappy, as the man she loves has married her best friend, and wanting only oblivion:

'"Oh, sometimes I wish I could just go to sleep and never wake up again!" Her lips thinned to a straight line and her eyes were very sombre. Then she relaxed, firmly pushing to the back of her mind the thoughts which had given rise to the wish. No help was to be found that way, and though she was bitterly unhappy just then, she would have never done anything to attain that rest. Grizel Cochrane had too much in her for that.'²²

Problems of Faith

Very few problems of faith are ignored. Jo Maynard has to battle with the relationship between faith and healing when her youngest daughter is critically ill with polio, and the reality of grief and anxiety is acknowledged. When Miss Annersley tries to comfort Jo with the reminder, 'Don't despair - Phil is in God's hands. She *could* not be safer', the distressed mother can only reply, 'I know, but it's not a lot of comfort at the moment'.²³

Again it is Jo who has to try and reconcile human suffering with her belief in a loving God when she meets a woman of her own age who is in constant pain from acute rheumatism (*Jo To The Rescue*²⁴) and these are all questions to which there is no easy answer, nor is one suggested. The principle is always that of 'going deep', of thinking

through one's beliefs and working towards true understanding rather than superficial acceptance, and Brent-Dyer is certainly not alone in this, though the subjects she deals with are usually more profoundly disturbing than those of her fellow-writers.

In Kathleen McLeod's *Julia of Sherwood School*, the girls are praying about the election of prefects:

'Rhoda prayed very earnestly that Julia and Hilary might be chosen. She owned to the others that she had put the election in her prayers.

"It will be awkward if somebody else is asking God to let Addie Baron or someone else be chosen," said Sunny, trying to face a problem that has puzzled and distressed wiser folk than junior school-girls. '25

The above-mentioned Triffeny finds the same problem when she prays to win a pottery competition:

'Up till that morning she had prayed for success, and then she had suddenly stopped, silenced by some vague confused idea that it wasn't, perhaps, quite playing the game to ask for special favours under the circumstances. Triffeny did not find prayer an easy matter; she felt it couldn't be if one thought about it at all. '26

None of this can be classed as sentimental, and the analysis continues into areas of emotional difficulty. Forgiveness, for example, despite its cosy sound, is sometimes very difficult for human beings to achieve, and its treatment by Elinor Brent-Dyer is searching and austere. In *Genius at the Chalet School*, Nina Rutherford, a very talented and dedicated pianist, has her wrist injured because of the clumsiness and carelessness of another girl. Nina totally refuses to forgive the penitent Hilda, and is taken to task by her Headmistress:

"There are more important things than music, even," Miss Annersley said sternly - "I hope, until you feel differently about Hilda, you won't try to say Our Father, Nina. Have you ever thought what a terrible condemnation of yourself you are calling down if you ask to be forgiven your trespasses exactly as you forgive those of others? Think that over, please, and ask God to give you the grace of pity." '27

Brent-Dyer's faith was too deep for her to be able to ignore its implications in any context and, on a rather lighter note, she is the only author to find a conflict between her

beliefs and one of her plots. *Highland Twins at the Chalet School* is set during the war, and during the course of the book, Jo Maynard's husband is reported missing. Flora, one of the twins of the title, has the Celtic power of second sight and suggests using this to bring Jo news of Jack. Brent-Dyer was no whit concerned with the credibility of this, but she *was* worried that it was wrong from a religious view-point. Ultimately she compromises by keeping the action going, but providing a touchstone in the person of Miss Wilson, the Deputy Head, who is disgusted by the whole proceeding:

'In a few words the Head explained, and "Bill"'s face grew disapproving. "I don't like it, Hilda. It's meddling with powers best left alone."

Miss Annersley, with very uncharacteristic lack of logic, claims to disapprove herself but to be willing to try anything to bring comfort to Jo, and Miss Wilson reluctantly agrees, but with caveats which were designed to ensure that none of Brent-Dyer's impressionable readers rushed out to emulate the proceedings:

'Well, on your head be it then. But I don't agree with it at all ... you *will* forbid it for the future, won't you, Hilda? I do feel it's wrong ... I've got a "free" for the next two periods, so I'll go to my room and say a rosary for Jo and Jack. And that's better than any amount of "seeing"" even if it *is* second sight!'.²⁸

Faith in a Post-Christian Society

We now live in a post-Christian society, where church-going is no longer the acceptable social norm, where traditional moral values are not necessarily accepted and where Christianity is no longer the major cultural medium, and it is interesting to see how Elinor Brent-Dyer, the only author whose long writing life spanned the divide, adapts to this. In the major part of the series, certainly before the 1950s, basic Christianity is the norm and is referred to only fleetingly, but as the social climate changes, the religious element in the books becomes much more specifically stated. By the 1960s several girls have arrived at the Chalet School with no religious background or interest, and they and the school regard each other with mutual incomprehension. The decision of Naomi Elton's aunt to let the girl decide on her own religious affiliations 'caused a hubbub in

the Staffroom, for such an arrangement had never before been heard of at the Chalet School,²⁹ and Mary-Lou has never before met an unbaptized person. In 1960 Len Maynard is trying to persuade Ruey Richardson to say her prayers before going to bed, but Ruey, though ready enough to oblige, does not know how to pray:

'Religion had meant very little in her life so far. It had been rather a shock to her when she saw Len kneel down, night after night. It had been quite as much of a shock to Len to see Ruey tumble into bed without... Ruey mumbled the Lord's Prayer to herself and followed it up with a somewhat incoherent word or two of thanks for her new clothes and new friends. That done, she remained kneeling, wondering what more she could say. She could find nothing, but stayed there until Len got up. Then she rose too, and gave her friend a grin.

"I hope you're satisfied now?" she remarked.³⁰

Ruey takes very little persuasion to take her beliefs more seriously, but Naomi Elton (*Trials For The Chalet School*) has actively rejected God after being lamed in a fire which also killed her parents, and the book is largely concerned with her journey back to faith. It is Mary-Lou Trelawney who has to cope with Naomi's "I don't believe in God. Or if He really is there, then He just doesn't care", and it is her staunch faith even under difficult and dangerous circumstances which impresses the other girl. The thesis of the book is finally unconvincing, for Naomi makes a bargain with God - if she is healed, she will believe. New treatment does make it possible for her to receive medical help, but this is surely one of the worst bases for faith. Nevertheless, the attempt at grappling with lack of faith is an interesting one and is unique even for Brent-Dyer. Naomi's ultimate return to faith is inevitable, but this is not a facile bowing to the establishment. For the author and others like her, it was unthinkable that anyone should be left in the misery and loneliness of refusing to take the comfort and support offered by God. Mary-Lou takes charge on the basis of 'how could anyone bearing the disabilities [Naomi] did go through life without some help, and who could give it but God', and this is very much the feeling of the author.

It is left to Antonia Forest, the only modern author to take religion at all seriously, to include within the same group of people a whole gamut of differing attitudes. The

majority of the Marlow family share Nicola's lack of interest and inability to understand why it is so important to other people. Ann is the only one to take her beliefs seriously, and her determined 'goodness' causes immense irritation to the others and isolates her within the family. However, Patrick, the neighbour and close friend of the Marlows, is a convinced and conservative Catholic, and is in fact asked to leave his Church school because of his rejection of modernised doctrine and his adherence to the old Latin Mass. Patrick and Nicola indulge in long and complicated discussions on the subject (*Attic Term* : 1976)³¹ and, indeed, touch on some fundamental points. Nicola's whole way of thinking receives a jolt when Patrick points out that unbelief is as much a matter of faith as is belief when the existence of God can be neither proved nor disproved empirically. However, one is left with the feeling that the interest and value lie in the historicity of the institution rather than in a personal faith; Patrick's personal belief is something he is still trying to work out.

This analysis of faith was the conscious intention of the authors, and can certainly be seen as an agent of spiritual and emotional growth for the reader. However, we are looking for liberating images, and these are found in the subtexts of the books, which go far beyond the surface level to provide images of omnipotent women which were, had they been heeded, deeply subversive of traditional theology. These culminate in specific images of deity which fundamentally question the church's traditional view of an all-male Trinity. Allied with images of omnipotence, however, are strongly maternal images, and this concept of women who are at once the controllers of their universe and deeply connected in love to the inhabitants of their world lead us to a vision of a maternal and all-loving God, an insight which gives power to women and makes access to and relationship with God possible at a totally different level. Woman is both Creator and Redeemer, and can thus reclaim the Word and Image of which she has been deprived in traditional theology. Because school-stories are 'only' children's books, and 'only' girls' books at that, they were not heeded, and were left to make their impact, however subliminal, on the consciousness of their readers.

Feminist approaches to theology

Whatever the attitude to religion of individual authors, they unite in apparently accepting the premise of a male God, male priests and a male-oriented theology, with no awareness on the surface of the texts that this might pose any problem at all for women. That there is a problem has been amply demonstrated in the work of feminist theologians over the past century; they have shown the silencing and absorption of women even by the male language of theology as woman becomes 'the silent Other of the symbolic order',³² and there have been many attempts to cope with the difficulties.

Some, like Phyllis Trible³³(1978) and Mary Evans³⁴(1983) have continued to accept the Bible as uniquely authoritative and have tried to re-interpret and reclaim Biblical texts, emphasising the inadequacies of past translations and the woman-affirming structures within the texts.

Others, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton³⁵(1895), Rosemary Radford Ruether³⁶(1974) and Elisabeth Fiorenza³⁷(1983) have espoused a more radical re-reading, attempting to 'bring to bear the whole force of the feminist critique upon biblical texts and religion' and to 'denounce all texts and traditions that perpetrate and legitimate oppressive patriarchal structures and ideologies'.³⁸

Some have found that the attempt leaves them outside the church altogether; Mary Daly³⁹(1973) has rejected orthodox theology for a spirituality based on more ancient forms of women-centred worship, and for Daphne Hampson (1990) 'women are disrupted in their worship by the masculinity of the religion to the point that it ceases to be for them a vehicle through which they can love God'.⁴⁰

The work of the French feminist thinkers is differently premised, being based on theories of psychoanalysis. Luce Irigaray, in *Speculum of the Other Woman*⁴¹ (1974), has associated women with a non-theological mysticism and with the suffering Christ; in mysticism women have experienced a loss of subjecthood which she sees as having been the only cultural escape in the past from mirrored vision. However, this leaves women still powerless and marginalised, and this is their inescapable condition within the patriarchal order according to French theory which, while not being apolitical (the publication of *Speculum* caused Irigaray to lose her post in the Department of

Psychoanalysis at Vincennes because of her political critique of Freud and Lacan), sees little hope in working for political change. It pins its faith instead on the development of a specifically feminine discourse based partly on the rhythms of the female body, partly on a voluntary mode which is equally available to men; only in language is there possibility of disruption and revolution.

Hélène Cixous has drawn on a tradition of female attributes of God expressed in a line of female prophets and messiahs, and by the 1980s Julia Kristeva was celebrating the Virgin Mary in *Stabat Mater*⁴²(1977/1983), but again the traditional image of Mary has not always been a positive one for women. For many women, French theory is less than helpful. It is so abstruse that it is accessible only to the intellectually-trained and there are arguably highly restrictive elements in the theoretical insistence on the only possible discourse for women being the pre-oedipal babble.

Problems of monotheism

Partly, of course, the difficulties spring from the concept of monotheism itself. It is clear even from Biblical evidence that the polytheistic cultures surrounding the Jews conceptualized the divine through the use of both male and female imagery, though the position and presentation of the female in any pantheon should make us wary of seeing this as necessarily a preferable alternative. Nevertheless, it has to be true that, if there is only one God who is seen as male, this is 'women's only access to the symbolic order',⁴³ and however hard one tries to concentrate on the genderless aspect of the spirit-god, it is a virtual imaginative impossibility.

Kristeva describes it as the process by which 'the semiotic practice of the sign ... assimilates the metaphysical strategy of the symbol and projects it onto the immediately perceptible. The latter, thus valorized, is then transformed into an objectivity which becomes the reigning law of discourse in the civilisation of the sign.'⁴⁴

With specific reference to Christianity, she points out that 'the Word, that is "the interpretant" ... becomes blurred and its replicas more visual and substantive, linked together in a horizontal chain firmly situated in this world. That is why it is no longer the Word (Christ as idea) which retains the meaning; instead it is the combination of

"marking" (images of the old man, the sky, the stars), which produce it ... 'the signifying unit no longer refers back to the vast "idea" behind it, but instead becomes opaque, materialized and identifies with itself'⁴⁵ - or, as Alice Walker puts it rather more simply, 'Us talk and talk about God, but I'm still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head.'⁴⁶

Woman is deprived of both Word and Image; in current theological debate non-Conformist churches are refusing to admit women to positions of teaching or leadership because of Paul's remarks in 1 Corinthians 14 : 34-36 and 1 Timothy 2 : 8-15 about women being silent in church, while the resistance to the ordination of women as priests in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches was justified by their perceived inability to be a true icon of the male Christ, a theory based partly on assumptions about male and female nature itself, partly on positional relations between the two.

Theological concepts of male and female

Men have been associated with that which is above, spiritual and like God, whereas women have been associated with that which is below, of the earth, sexual and unlike God, and this inferiority is the basis of difference and of the violently anti-woman premises of the early church fathers.

Karen Armstrong has graphically illustrated in *The Gospel According To Woman* (1986) the power of the concept of innate and essential female culpability which has characterized the church for thousands of years; Eve is the cause of the Fall, the cause of all misery, guilt and evil, the origin of all human sin.

Eve not only sinned herself, but seduced the man into disobedience - 'the woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat ... it was not Adam who was led astray but the woman who was led astray and fell into sin'⁴⁷, and this is the guilt, not only of Eve, but of all womankind.

'You are the devil's gateway', says Tertullian, speaking to women in the third century, 'you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree : You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of *your* desert - that is death - even the Son of God had to die.'

The longevity of such thinking is shown in the fact that, in February of 1991, four student priests at the Cambridge theological college of Westcott House removed from the chapel copies of Janet Morley's women's prayer book, *All Desires Known*⁴⁸ (1988), and burned them in the quadrangle; when, on May 7th, 1994, the first women were ordained as priests in the Church of England, they were publicly condemned in television interviews by opposing male priests, not in terms of differing interpretations of doctrine, but as witches and transvestites.

Doctrines of male headship

The crucial doctrine, however, is that of male headship. If woman is basically tainted, a secondary place in the divine order of society is fitting for her, and the submission of women to men was (and still is, in many church circles) clearly taught as a divine imperative, a state of affairs ordained by God and valid in all contexts and throughout all generations. Although woman's nature is seen as being deficient in relation to that of men, the fundamental point is not nature but position, for women are perceived as being created to be in subjection to men. For Thomas Hopko 'women are created and called to be men's "helpers" in their service of self-emptying love'⁴⁹, and Daphne Hampson, in her *Theology and Feminism* (1990), quotes male theologians throughout the ages to illustrate the point of dominant essential maleness:

'the Logos is a masculine principle. The Logos is the active, manifesting, creative, destructive, redemptive power of the godhead.' (Anglican theologian V.A. Demant)

Graham Leonard, the previous Bishop of London, says:

'headship and authority is symbolically and fundamentally associated with maleness ... symbolically and fundamentally, the response of sacrificial self-giving is associated with femaleness ... For a woman to represent the Headship of Christ and the Divine initiative would, unless her feminine gifts were obscured or minimized, evoke a different approach to God from those who worship.'⁵⁰

It is possible to identify a flaw in the argument which attaches 'femaleness' to the sacrificial self-giving of which Christ himself must surely be the prime example.

Thomas Aquinas summarized the problem succinctly:

'Priesthood ... signifies authority ... Now a woman is not such that she can signify authority, that is to say she does not have the sign-quality which would signify authority. For woman ... is in a state of subjection.'⁵¹ Thomas then proceeds to consider whether a male slave could be ordained, giving the answer obviously not while he remains a slave, for slavery cannot signify authority, but slavery is a condition of external fortune, and if freed from his slavery, then he can be ordained.

Woman's position, however, is divinely ordained and immutable, so a similar freedom can never be hers.

The Headmistress : An Authority Figure

With this theological background, it can be seen how vital and empowering an image is that of the authoritative woman, and here the school texts manage, in their treatment of the headmistresses, to circumvent traditional theology without anyone even noticing. It was, after all, considered inevitable that a girls' school should have a female Head and, despite the considerable personal qualities of these women both in fact and in fiction, they were rendered generally invisible by two factors.

First, girls' schools had much less status than did boys' schools. One of the difficulties of trying to research the former is that so many have not felt it important to keep their records, and it is clear from the statements of Headmistresses involved in joint public school organisations that they felt second-class citizens.

The second is society's perception (i.e. men's perception) of the Head herself. Authority, as we have seen, was conceived in male terms. So was the faculty of rational thought, so that an intellectual woman in a position of authority was caught in a double bind. Either she was accused of having denied her femininity, or she was treated as a sex object anyway, whatever her position and qualifications, and both these reactions are well-exemplified in very serious texts on education written by men of considerable academic reputation.

We find the first (the authoritative woman who has denied her femininity) in Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy's *The Public School Phenomenon*, published in 1977. In his perception, Mary Alice Douglas, Head of Godolphin School for over thirty years, is transformed into a pseudo-man by twenty-nine years of 'power and adulation', and he proves his point by comparing two photographs of the woman:

'In 1890, it is certainly a strong face, but it is a feminine one; she has long hair pulled back and piled up, a long skirt, fine bosom and a slender waist. In 1919 she is wearing collar and tie, a pin-stripe coat, a waistcoat, a skirt (or are they trousers? It is impossible to see); she has the short-cut hair, greying at the temples, and the level gaze of a successful headmaster.'⁵²

Gathorne-Hardy assumes that dignity and authority are the rightful property of the male of the species ('the gaze of a *headmaster*'), but his own words illustrate the reasons for the growth of the fashion which Ms Douglas chose to follow, which aimed at giving an image of professionalism and competence, and at avoiding being perceived as a sexual object. The description of the 'feminine' photograph immediately concentrates on her physical attributes, her bosom and waist, and even the image of the author peering under the table to see what she is wearing (trousers being a highly unlikely option at that date) is voyeuristic.

The seriousness of the problem and the need for such self-defensive measures are seen in the way in which women, whatever their authority and competence, and however far they have tried to assume 'masculine' characteristics for self-protection, are still judged as women, and are still seen in a fundamental way as sexual objects. The process is unconscious, but deeply ingrained even in men of considerable academic and public stature.

This is clearly seen in the work of John Rae, who, in his overview of the troubled period of the Sixties and Seventies in the history of independent schools, *The Public School Revolution* (1981), uses language in a most curious way with regard to professional women. He speaks of Shirley Williams, the then Secretary of State for Education, in glowing terms, praising her intelligence, realism and lack of bigotry, her ability to listen patiently to all shades of opinion, her courage in making up her own

mind, and describing her as 'the only Secretary of State for Education since the war to make a major public impact', yet still adds, 'The Headmasters of independent schools, who as a group are *particularly susceptible to feminine charm*, were tempted to regard her as an ally.'⁵³ (My italics).

More subtle is his change in lexis when speaking of the headmistresses of the girls' schools. It was at this time that ISIS (the Independent Schools' Information Service) was set up, and the idea met with initial resistance from school bursars (almost entirely male) and from the girls' schools who were doubtful about joining an organisation which they suspected would be dominated by headmasters, and who feared that closer co-operation might encourage the transfer of girls to the Sixth Form of boys' schools. Neither of these objections appears unreasonable, but both were dismissed by one headmaster (with the clear approval of Rae) as 'the long-felt complex shared by many headmistresses that they were second-class citizens'.⁵⁴

There is an assumption of neurosis rather than any examination of the reality of the grounds of their perceptions, but the very language Rae uses takes on overtones of courtship as soon as he begins speaking of these women. We are told, for example, that 'the bursars remained unconvinced [a rational response] and the headmistresses played hard to get [a sexual response]', and, even more specific:

'The bursars eventually agreed not to delay the creation of the information service...The headmistresses proved more awkward ... They needed help but objected to what they thought was the patronising attitude of the headmasters. In short they did not want to be taken for granted; they wanted to be won over. ...[Donald Lindsay] had the political skill and good humour needed to woo the girls' schools. He never made the mistake of talking down to headmistresses. He flattered them. They saw through it and surrendered.'⁵⁵

This dismissive attitude to women who were intelligent, responsible and powerful, is itself a potent reinforcement of the headmistresses' arguments regarding their secondary status, but women were still perceived as immature, emotional creatures incapable of responding to male rationality. This did at least ensure that powerful women were left alone to function within their own woman-centred sphere; no-one noticed what was happening, and no-one, therefore, tried to stop it.

Heads of schools in this country have traditionally enjoyed almost complete power and autonomy within their own domain. They can thus hardly avoid symbolising an ultimate authority, and while this is in itself an unusual enough position for a woman, it is further extended by the fact that temporal authority was seen very specifically as mirroring and representing the authority of God, to whom all earthly authorities were finally accountable. 'It is not easy to place oneself under discipline when one believes one has outgrown such a necessity,' declares the headmistress in May Wynne's *Honour Of The School* (1926), 'but the very effort will help you to understand that we are under discipline all our lives to a Higher Power.'⁵⁶ It is very interesting, therefore, to see how this authority is presented in the books.

The vast majority of fictional headmistresses are extremely impressive women - as, indeed, were their actual counterparts; it was the exceptional characters who pioneered girls' education, as in all other fields. They combine absolute authority with large measures of understanding and loving-kindness and are, almost without exception, both adored and fervently respected by their pupils, 'the terror and the adoration of the whole school'.⁵⁷ In some of the earlier books these feelings are expressed in ways which are inevitably amusing to a modern reader.

Angela Brazil's Miss Kaye is annually garlanded with roses on her birthday,⁵⁸ and Kits Kerwayne kisses her headmistress's hand in token of affection,⁵⁹ but perhaps this kind of treatment is appropriate for ladies who attire themselves in 'amethyst velvet and old lace', or who can be described as 'a glittering vision in satin'. Despite their gentility, however, there is no doubt at all about the autocracy of even the early Heads. She is the supreme authority, and the two most requisite characteristics of any such quasi-divinity are those of justice, mercy - and control.

Justice, with its implication of totally predictable right, goes hand in hand with dependability, and headmistresses are almost always bastions of serenity, reliability and security. Winifred Darch's Miss Eliot is respected by her pupils because, despite her strictness, 'she was the most absolutely just person you could imagine and her word was to be depended upon utterly',⁶⁰ and in the beginning-of-term chaos at D.F.Bruce's Maudsley Grammar School, 'nobody knew where to find anybody, and no-one was

settled or tranquil, except the headmistress, working steadily and quietly in her study, where she might be found by all who sought her, the one really abiding person in this upheaval of newness'.⁶¹

When Elinor Brent-Dyer's Beechy goes to the Harbour School as a new pupil who has recently lost her mother, she finds that 'for the first time since her mother's death Beechy felt that in Miss Eliot and Matron she had found two people who would stand by her'⁶² - and this despite the fact that she has been living with affectionate relatives.

The implementation of justice inevitably implies punishment, and few indeed are the headmistresses who cannot reduce a schoolful of unruly girls to subjection by a mere glance from their chilly blue eyes. Their methods of control range from the remorseless wearing down of the culprit by 'calm, well-balanced arguments' to the fury of Sybil Owsley's Miss Silverlock, who confronts her erring pupils in a blaze of confused metaphor:

'Her white hair was hurled from her forehead. The deep pools of her eyes had changed to smouldering fires.'⁶³

Elinor Brent-Dyer's Miss Annersley can be as crushing as most, as evidenced in her reply to Len Maynard, who is blaming herself for the bad behaviour of some juniors:

'Go away, Len, and please try to overcome this absurd scrupulosity of yours. If it goes on, you will end up by becoming morbid. No blame attaches to you for whatever they are up to, and no blame is attributed to you. Now please go away. I have too much to do to be worried by the need to soothe your conscience.'⁶⁴

There is a fundamental dissatisfaction with Heads who are weak and biased like Mrs. Lane in May Wynne's *Playing The Game*⁶⁵ (1947), who condemns pupils on the flimsiest of evidence and is totally unsympathetic to her girls. Even Antonia Forest's Miss Keith, the headmistress of Kingscote,⁶⁶ eventually follows the pattern, despite being initially presented as a disaster. Miss Keith, vulgarized from the beginning of the book by her nieces' irreverent appellation 'me Auntie', is a silly woman, pompous, unsympathetic and addicted to psychological experiments rather than to common-sense, but she is not ineffective. She can reduce sinners to pulp with the best of her forebears,

and even manages eventually to imbue her irrepressible niece Tim with a modicum of respect for her position.

The Headmistress : A Divine Figure

Ultimately this supreme authority finds its natural expression in quite specific images of divinity. Elinor Brent-Dyer's Miss Annersley is referred to by her pupils as 'the Abbess', though this is the image of the convent rather than the church and is limited by the historical submission of female religious orders to the male church hierarchy. Nevertheless, it is an image of great dignity and authority, and Hilda Annersley can certainly be seen as the archetypal virgin goddess, self-contained, inviolate, totally controlled and totally controlling, yet doing so with justice tempered with mercy, humour and compassion. It is noteworthy that, in Merryn Williams' *The Chalet Girls Grow Up*, a deeply cynical and satirical continuation of the series which lays waste all the much-loved characters, it is only Miss Annersley who escapes. She is left old and lonely, certainly, but her dignity and integrity, and her past successes and triumphs, are left intact.⁶⁷ Ethel Talbot's Miss Graham takes the imagery further; she is presented as the High-Priestess of the Rookery School, and is given divine attributes - her greeting to her excited and noisy girls is described, quite seriously, as 'after the thunder, the still, small voice',⁶⁸ the phrase used to describe the appearance of God to Elijah (1 Kings 19:12).

Angela Brazil's Miss Cavendish rules St. Chad's from a sanctum which bears a remarkable resemblance to a cathedral, including 'a large, stained-glass window, filled with figures of saints, that faced the doorway'.⁶⁹ The theme is continued even in Joanna Lloyd's much more light-hearted books, where the girls use the name of their headmistress, Miss Atherton, as an oath in startling phrases like, 'Did she, by Atherton', and 'Good Atherton! What was Catherine doing now?'⁷⁰

It can even be argued that, together with omnipotence, these women take on, within the books, something of the divine quality of omnipresence. A magazine article on Brent-Dyer's Hilda Annersley concludes:

'If I'd been asked I would have said that Hilda plays a large part in the majority of the books, but by doing the necessary re-reading for this article, I realised that this is not so - she invariably has only a small role : a welcoming speech at the beginning of term; a staff meeting; the chastising of a difficult pupil, and often little else. Yet the impression is there of her presence - the firm hand steering the characters through yet another turbulent term.'⁷¹

The Head can even (though rarely) be in direct conflict with the established church. Shirley Foster and Judy Simons have pointed out that in Angela Brazil's *Madcap of the School* it is the authority of the headmistress which is finally validated and her judgement which is proved to be sound, while the arrogant and patronising clergyman (who is also the Head's brother), is removed from the action, discredited and vanquished.⁷²

Headmistress: A Mother Figure

However, it is possible to argue that the giving of power and authority to women in this way is itself problematical, merely replacing a male hierarchy with a female one, and posing no questions about power structures in personal relationships or in community - merely, in fact, changing pronouns. Mary Daly has pointed out that if the masculine character of God remains unchanged, the position for women is actually worsened as the God of the tradition, now female, absorbs women's reality into the tradition of western theological thought:

'The use of the feminine forms merely suggests that the christian divinity is so superior and magnanimous that he can contain all female values ... the christian god can arrogantly announce that he is also a "she" (during alternative services).'⁷³

The point is valid, but is avoided in school-stories by combining the divine role with the strongly maternal function of both the Head herself and the school. The already quoted incident between Hilda Annersley and Len Maynard provides an illustration of the duality of the Head's role, for Miss Annersley is an old friend of Len's family and is actually very fond of the girl, to whom she is 'Auntie Hilda' out of school hours. For as well as administering justice, Heads must possess 'a world of experience and kindly

wisdom'; indeed the two are in many ways indivisible, as discipline is only justifiable and bearable in a context of love. Miss Annersley always tempers justice with mercy if it is humanly possible, and Harriet Martyn's Miss Hamilton (*Balcombe Hall* series, 1980s) is offered the headship of Balcombe Hall because she is the only person to have won the respect and affection of the rebellious and contemptuous Fifth Year, a feat she achieves partly because she is the only one who can control them, but partly because it is she alone who cares enough to look beyond their bad behaviour and force them to begin to fulfil their potential.⁷⁴

Motherly feeling was definitely expected from headmistresses, and it is perhaps inevitable that L.T.Meade, writing in the 1880s and in a style which is rather effusive to modern readers, should exemplify the extreme of the theme. In her *World Of Girls* (1886) Mrs. Willis, the headmistress, is an archetypal mother-figure;

'she sat with the little children round her knee, and the older girls clustering about her. Her gracious and motherly face was like a sun shining in the midst of these young girls.'⁷⁵

She sends her pupils to bed with 'a mother-kiss and a murmured blessing', and the star prize at the end of the school year consists of a locket containing a picture of the headmistress. The worst punishment that can befall the girls is a withdrawing of her love:

"Ordinary punishments are not likely to affect you, Cecil
... but there is something else you must lose, and that I
know will touch you deeply - I must remove from you my
confidence."

Cecil's face grew very pale.

"And your love, too," she said, looking up with imploring
eyes;

"Oh, surely not your love as well?"⁷⁶

Mrs. H. Martin, also writing at the end of the nineteenth century in *The Loneliest Girl in the School* (1880-1890), condemns her Mrs. Tarleton for her lack of maternal instinct:

'She was too ... elaborately dignified for her girls to feel, even in holiday-time, that there was anything motherly about Mrs. Tarleton ... They never wanted her to kiss them.'⁷⁷

Maternal affection is often fervently reciprocated. Grace, in *At School and At Home* (1828), 'loved her kind instructress with an attachment almost filial, and the idea of quitting her, even for so short a period as six weeks, nearly broke her heart'.⁷⁸ It is significant that Grace, in common with very many fictional schoolgirls, is motherless. Many girls in the earlier books are left in the entire charge of their headmistresses, who take on these major commitments with scarcely a blink. Even in 1925, Elinor Brent-Dyer's Juliet Carrick is abandoned at school by her parents (*The School at the Chalet*), and Madge Bettany accepts her as her ward with remarkable calm. Some teachers go far beyond guardianship and transmute the maternal role into reality by marrying the father of their loving and motherless pupil - though it is significant that this does not happen to headteachers, who remain the archetypal virgin mother, the vast majority being, at this point of time, unmarried.

Mother-love versus father-love

It is deeply significant that this is *mother-love*. Because Christian theology has perceived God as being exclusively male, and because Western society has cast male and female human beings in different roles with different emotional responses, we have cut ourselves off from a vital aspect of God's love. We can perceive 'him' as father, but not as mother, and for many (male) theologians, this is a fundamental truth. Daphne Hampson quotes the conservative American theologian Thomas Howard;

'Jews and Christians worship the God who has gone to vast and prolonged pains to disclose himself to us as he not she, as king not Queen, and for Christians as Father not Mother, and who sent his Son not his daughter in the final unveiling of himself for our eyes. These are terrible mysteries and we have no warrant to tinker with them.'⁷⁹

If one regards these mysteries as indeed terrible in their effect on women, tinkering might seem a good option, and is justified by the perception that 'the images themselves

are not directly God-given but arise from man's analogical imagination ... that which is conveyed is clearly shaped by the concretion'.⁸⁰

The fact that different images will produce different relationships is clearly recognised, but Bishop Leonard's assumption that any other form of worship is unacceptable is echoed by even the somewhat more intellectual C.S.Lewis: 'To say that [masculine imagery] does not matter is to say either that all the masculine imagery is not inspired, is merely human in origin, or else that, though inspired, it is quite arbitrary and unessential. And this is surely intolerable ... A child who had been taught to pray to a Mother in Heaven would have a religious life radically different from a Christian child.'⁸¹

A child who prayed to a mother in heaven would, indeed, have a fundamentally different conception of God. It can be argued that she would have a different sense of herself as well had she grown up counting herself as made in God's image. But God is male, and God is father.

This is vitally important because society has constructed the love of the mother and the father in quite different ways, and the social symbolism remains untouched, whatever the reality of actual relationships. Psychoanalytical research reveals that 'children tend to experience the father as law-giver - an arbiter of truth and justice, crime and punishment - even when this is quite inappropriate'.⁸² The love of the father has to be earned, and is dependent on good behaviour; that of the mother is eternal, unconditional, and dependent only on relationship - we are loved because we are her child. The father is the judge, the punisher, the giver and upholder of the law, the one who gives us what we deserve; the mother is the refuge, the comforter, the one who accepts, upholds and gives, controlled by the impetus of her love, not by our deserts.

Fathers in school-stories are fundamentally harsher towards their children than are mothers and, as can be seen by the wide spread of dates of the texts quoted, this is a deep-rooted concept which spans many decades of thought. In Brent-Dyer's *Joey and Co. in Tirol* (1960)⁸³ Jack Maynard refuses for some time to forgive his son for a dangerous escapade which has caused a nervous collapse in his mother, and when, earlier in the series, (*Gay from China at the Chalet School* (1944))⁸⁴, Sybil Russell scolds her

little sister badly through her own disobedience, *her* father does not speak to her or go near her for a fortnight.

Mother-love is very different in quality. E.L.Haverfield claims that 'a mother's love ... is all full of protection and self-denial' (*Blind Loyalty*, 1911)⁸⁵ and the difference is illustrated by Elinor Brent-Dyer in the above-mentioned incident with Jo Maynard's naughty son. When Jo discovers that Mike is the family outcast, she is furious. Her reaction is a simple; 'Mike's our boy and he's going to realise that however bad he may be, we still love him and will go on loving him.'⁸⁶

Rachel, in Lena Tyack's *Girl Who Lost Things* (1924), says after her mother's death:

'I know, of course, that father is very good to me, but his love is quite different, and there are lots of things he does not understand ... I feel as though I had lived all my life surrounded by a high wall and now it has been taken away and there is nothing between me and the world.'⁸⁷

Fathers cannot compensate for mothers, for fathers, like God, are distant. 'God, in this period of theophany,' declares Luce Irigaray, 'does not share, he dictates (il impose). He separates himself.'⁸⁸

Thus, if we perceive God only as Father, we are left only with a stern Victorian parent, impervious to our needs, and are cosmically separated from the aspect of God's love which, perhaps, we most need. Anna Briggs has stressed that this image of God is a distortion of the real meaning of the love of God and the God of love. She contrasts this image of God with the vulnerability of Jesus as shown in the Gospels and suggests that the fact that the church has managed to create the one in the face of the other 'is testimony to something - and from my point of view it looks suspiciously like the male orientation of the church itself'.⁸⁹

So, in the fusion of God-like authority and maternal love, in the presentation of women who are at once the total controllers of their universe and deeply connected in love to the inhabitants of that world, school-fiction opens up to us fundamentally different possibilities of perceiving and relating to God. It opens up, too, alternative modes of relation in both the public and private worlds of society; this duality of role makes possible the conjunction of love and justice in the public sphere, and negates the

philosophy of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who claimed (writing in 1965) that 'in the family love should rule, but in the public sphere no more than justice is possible ...sacrificial love [is] a moral norm relevant to interpersonal (particularly family) relations, and significant for parents (particularly mothers), heroes and saints, but scarcely applicable to the power relations of modern industry.'⁹⁰ Daphne Hampson points out that justice is as important as love in the private sphere and, equally, one could argue that our society (and even our industry) would be vastly improved if love as well as justice were to reign in the public sphere.

Implications for the definition of motherhood

If the maternal emphasis changes the character of power, the possession of authority challenges our construct of motherhood, and no longer can a mother be defined as 'she who satisfies need, but has no access to desire',⁹¹ or as the 'nurturing, selfless, self-sacrificing mother ... the ideal embodiment of the woman who could fulfil all [man's] expectations and longings'.⁹² This concept is challenged within the texts, for, despite multifarious household and educational duties, mothers must remain people.

In Angela Brazil's *Harum-Scarum Schoolgirl* (1919), Diana visits her friend's home for the holidays and is shocked at the casual way in which the family treat Mrs. Fleming, a charming and talented woman who has 'made the common mistake of effacing herself utterly for the sake of her children ... her interests were centred in the young people's achievements and she had become merely the theatre of their actions'. As a result 'they were devoted to her, but their love lacked all element of admiration'.⁹³ Under Diana's influence, Mrs. Fleming begins to take much more interest in her appearance, and takes up again the piano-playing which is her great talent. She astounds her family at a local concert, and the change in attitude is symbolised by her husband, who actually begins to use her Christian name instead of calling her 'Mother'.

Even motherhood itself as the ultimate fulfilment for women is questioned in A.M. Irvine's *Quiet Margaret* (1935), in the implicit conflict between the headmistress and the doctor called in to save the life of a child whose mother has accompanied her husband on

a year-long world tour, leaving their two daughters at their good boarding-school. Dr. Fleming calls in his wife, a trained nurse, to look after the girl during the night, and together they castigate this mother who has dared to leave her children. Mrs. Fleming's philosophy, thoroughly endorsed by her husband, is that:

'A mother's place is in the nursery ... at least that's the only place where she is really happy ... At the same time, dear, it seems to me as if we mothers shirk our duty as well as our joy when we leave our little ones to others.'⁹⁴

In terms of the book as a whole, Mrs. Abady is, indeed, portrayed as being criminally irresponsible. Yet the attitude of the author is ambivalent. Mrs. Fleming's total submergence in her children is quietly mocked and, if Mrs. Abady has put self-fulfilment before maternal duty, she has at least fulfilled the function of her sex by being a mother. Miss Temple, the headmistress of the school, has rejected both marriage and motherhood and appears as the ideal 'new woman', dignified, competent, in full control of her destiny - and fully vindicated by the author in a final exchange between the Head and the doctor. Dr. Fleming is complaining about how few women want to take up nursing, despite the nobility of the career, but it is clear that his real objection is to women choosing to be active subjects of their own lives and rejecting the role of servicing others which society has placed upon them. It is typical of medical discourse that the doctor sees these societal constructs as immutable laws of nature:

"all they want is to be the champion discus thrower in the world - anything that will unfit them for their natural duties."

"Times have changed," said Miss Temple quietly.

"Nature never changes," retorted the doctor.

He threw one reproachful glance at the stately, beautiful woman who had obviously chosen a career instead of her natural duties, and made off, feeling beaten.'⁹⁵

Role of school itself as mother

The distancing which allows women to keep their autonomy and not be swallowed up into the lives of those they love is established by the developing role of the school as

distinct from the Head, for British schools themselves, in both fact and fiction, have developed a strongly maternal tradition, perhaps because of our stress on pastoral care by teachers, a concept quite foreign to European colleagues. Celia Haddon has shown, in her study of girls' school songs (*Great Days And Jolly Days*, 1977), how true this is of actual schools. Lines like the following from the school song of West Kirby prove her point:

'You are mine to shape and fashion,
You are mine to love and tend',⁹⁶

and although the concept of loving and tending emerges very forcibly from the literature, for many authors the motherly Head is merely the representative of the school, which is itself the mother-figure (and the concept is at least as strong in boys' schools, though it is expressed rather differently - it was a male institution which coined the phrase 'alma mater' to describe its function). However, there is a difference between boys' and girls' schools. William Trevor illustrates in *The Old Boys*⁹⁷ (1974) the adherence of the now elderly ex-pupils to both the ethos and the old interpersonal conflicts of their schooldays, from which they have never escaped, and beyond which they have not grown. This is no doubt partly a reflection of the difference in status between boys' and girls' schools, but there is a deeper element here, too. Psychoanalysis talks of 'every individual's longing for perfect unity with the mother',⁹⁸ and claims that, 'because of their shared sex with the mother ... women are particularly liable to feel constrained and inhibited in their individuality by the continuing sense of being enmeshed with the mother, and the mother's image of them, whether hated or loved',⁹⁹ but the object of the fictional schools is to encourage the sort of maturation which results in eventual separation and individuation. It is better defined by Julia Kristeva: 'motherhood represents a mode of love which, like transference love, is at once unconditional and directed towards the final separation of the two subjects caught up in the amorous relationship'.¹⁰⁰

There is a definite and deliberate rejection of the attitude which allowed mothers to absorb their daughters in an almost cannibalistic way. Elinor Brent-Dyer's Daisy Venables describes her grandmother to Ruey Richardson, a young relative:

'Mrs. Thompson was a very bossy sort of person and she wanted to keep the children to herself ... She brought up her family more or less to think her thoughts and like what she liked ... You couldn't do it nowadays and you couldn't do it altogether then. In any case, it's not right. We all have to grow up with our own characters and not take them second-hand from other people. Mrs. Thompson wanted her children to have no life apart from hers.'¹⁰¹

The reaction of Ruey and the Maynard girls to this is a heart-felt 'how - sort of imprisoning' - though they fail to realise that the reason for this was precisely because Mrs. Thompson was allowed no life apart from her children, and independence for the child is closely allied to independence for the mother.

Elinor Brent-Dyer's Headmistresses have less of a maternal function than most of her compeers' because of the continuing contact with the school of the grown-up and strongly maternal Jo Bettany, who does most of the mothering that is necessary, leaving Miss Annersley free for the most part from sympathetic embraces; however, this in itself is somehow unsatisfactory, and the maternal role of the school itself is a totally basic assumption. For Elinor Brent-Dyer, school is home for both Staff and pupils. When Matron Lloyd's sister dies, the school staff are the only people left who know her well enough to call her by her Christian name, and they drop the nickname of years to do so, in a commitment to her akin to that of a substitute family.¹⁰² For orphaned Biddy O'Ryan, adopted by the school Guide Company and constantly connected with it, first as a pupil and later as a teacher, 'it's the school that's really been home to her ever since she was a kid',¹⁰³ and for old Herr Laubach, the lonely, irascible Art master, it is 'the only family he's got left'.¹⁰⁴

In one of the more recent school-stories, Anne Digby's *Hockey Term at Trebizon* (Dragon Books, Granada Publishing Ltd, London, 1984), the maternal role of the school is again emphasised as the staff combine to arrange transport to tennis matches for Rebecca, whose parents are abroad and cannot therefore give her the support she needs: 'But Mrs. Ericson and these three members of staff were determined that she shouldn't suffer in any way. She saw them consulting their diaries, making notes, agreeing to take

it in turns. She heard Greta Darling, stiff and unsmiling, but really quite fond of Rebecca, say at one point, "In loco parentis. It's the least we can do."

In place of parents! Trebizon - Rebecca was touched by that.¹⁰⁵

School as Redeemer

Finally, in addition to the maternal role, the role of the (strongly female) school is also redemptive, and this has great theological significance in a religion which expresses itself in terms of the creator Father and the redeemer Son, which leaves women in a place of immutable separation. Luce Irigaray argues that a 'place of irreducible non-substitutability exists within sexual difference'¹⁰⁶, and suggests that for monotheistic peoples to define God as a woman would mean a total upheaval in the symbolic order and a realignment of their entire socio-religious economy.

Hampson, too, refers to a book of illustrations of Christ crucified, drawn from a wide variety of cultures and eras, imaging Christs of different colours and perceived in different styles:

'But one thing these pictures ... have in common : they are all images of a man ... However Christ is understood ... they know him to be male. A woman is the "opposite" to Christ in a way in which someone of another race is not.'¹⁰⁷

Certainly the constructs of our particular society bind both women and men into fixed gender roles which operate at a very deep level. Gender differences in this area go much deeper than, for example, race differences; it is possible for our society to envisage a black Christ, but to predicate a female Christ is to point a difference which dislocates the entire image. And yet, the possibilities are there. Ellen Galford's *Fires of Bride*¹⁰⁸(1986), a novel which is based on the premise that Christ was actually twins, a boy and a girl, the girl continuing the spiritual work in secret while the boy ended his public ministry in death, is curiously heady reading, and a recent French exhibition on slavery included the 'Nkangi' crucifix from Zaire where the Africans had replaced the Christ figure brought by the missionaries with that of a woman.¹⁰⁹ Daphne Hampson relates the furore caused by the placing of a female crucifix in a New York church, but

the fact that the possibilities exist suggest that the restriction of conventional male imagery is due more to the depth and power of our cultural constructs than to the irreversibility of the images themselves.

Schools, both real and fictional, acquired a function at once maternal and redemptive and the redemptive function is tacitly accepted even in educational reports. Richard Gross's *British Secondary School Education* (1965), once required reading on postgraduate teacher training courses, declares when speaking of form-teachers, 'all senior contacts with her must be integrative before hers, with the girls, will be redemptive'.¹¹⁰ It goes on to state that the form-teacher (significantly always referred to as female in an era when normative pronouns were male) must face and accept what her pupils do, and must be on their side even when she is against the act - the classic principle of hating the sin and loving the sinner. This comes out strongly in school-stories. Hazel Moncrieff's father warns her:

'you are very severe on your fellow-creatures sometimes, and though I never want you to think lightly of what is wrong, I do want you to think lovingly of those who do the wrong; they may have temptations that you have never had to face, difficulties against which you have never had to struggle.'¹¹¹(*What Hazel Did*, 1924)

Forty years later, Elinor Brent-Dyer's Jo is stressing the same point when she tells Joan Baker:

'I loathe and despise what you *did*. It was dishonest and dishonourable. But your sin isn't *you*. Who am I to loathe and despise anyone who does a thing like that? If I'd ever been tempted in that way, I might have done the same thing myself.'¹¹²

Similarly, Miss Bennington, the headmistress in *Felgarth's Last Year* (1938), tries to explain to a broken-hearted deposed prefect, 'I'm not vexed or hard against you, yourself, only against your failure as a school officer.'¹¹³

The apotheosis of the theme is found in Ethel Talbot's *Patricia, Prefect*¹¹⁴ (1925), a fascinating and strange book worthy of close attention. In Talbot's St Chad's there is strong moral confusion, for the stress on conformity to the standards of the school itself has led to an identification of school tradition with basic morality, and an advocacy of mechanical acceptance of both. Public opinion has become 'an idol and a god that has to

be propitiated at all costs', and all must conform. The school prides itself on its high standards, but they are totally external. Anything is acceptable as long as appearances are kept up, and Pat's efforts to be 'blade-straight' are disapproved of because they are inconvenient and embarrassing. The school is run like a police state; if the Juniors misbehave, the Middles are punished; therefore the Middles effectively repress the Juniors. The girls are required to accept the school traditions without any attempt at thinking them through, and the regimentation is total. New girls are expected to become 'duly merged' as swiftly as possible, and when a girl answers to her name in a voice high-pitched with nervousness, the headmistress informs her reprovingly that 'there should be no noticeable difference in the intonation of any girl'. Any deviation from the norm of the accepted pattern is harshly rejected - but Ethel Talbot's view of school is strongly redemptive. Individuals matter, and there can be no ultimate conflict between the claims of the school and the individual, because the individuals are the school. A constant theme in her work is the bringing in of the outsider, while preserving intact individual differences. The new girl, Veronica, is expected to conform to the school image of morality, but as that morality is merely an external show it can offer her nothing; her desire to please Pat is considerably stronger, and leads her to perform actions for which Pat herself has to condemn her. The school cannot love the sinner and thus be in a position to forgive and expiate the sin, and has therefore failed; 'if Chads means that fibbing makes an outsider, well, then, Chads is small'. Chads is afraid to look at itself (the headmistress, always a symbol of the school ethos, is cold and uncaring, accepting the veneer), so closes its ranks and shuts Veronica out, becoming 'hard and inimical.' Pat, therefore, has to take on herself the role of individual saviour, and actually dies from pneumonia which she contracts when she goes after Veronica, who, on the verge of expulsion, has run away, and brings her back. Throughout the book is a recurrent image of the school Tapestry, which depicts a lamb being borne on the shoulders of a girl. This specifically religious image is a clear reversal of the usual image of Christ, the Redeemer, carrying the lost lamb, and paves the way for Pat's redemption of Veronica by means of a vicarious sacrifice. With her dying words - 'Keep

Veronica safe; because she's Chads' - Pat welds Veronica permanently to the school and forces it to fulfil its proper, redemptive, function.

Conclusion

In the terms of traditional theology, girls' school-stories are highly subversive texts. Lulled into security by the conforming surface of the texts, few have bothered to analyse the effect of the images being presented to girls and women, but doing so reveals that the subtexts of the books have the courage and vision to think the unthinkable. On the one hand the whole male orientation of generations of theological thought is questioned by powerful images of omnipotent women, acting as both deity and redeemer. On the other, power structures and structures of parenting are called into question by the conjunction of power and love which metamorphoses our preconceptions and opens up possibilities of new ways of relating and alternative means of structuring society. The images create a fundamental dissatisfaction with the partial vision of God which is so often all we are offered as women, pointing out how skewed is a theology which separates us from a full appreciation of God's love, and filling an emotional and spiritual void in a way not matched by any other literary genre in a re-vision which brings empowerment, release and fulfilment.

- 1 Angela Brazil, *The Nicest Girl in the School* (London, Glasgow: Blackie and Son, 1910), p.235
- 2 Mary Louise Parker, *Dormitory Wisteria* (Sampson Low, Marston & Co, 1947), p.82
- 3 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *The Head Girl of the Chalet School* (London, Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1928), p.322
- 4 Dorita Fairlie Bruce, *Dimsie Among the Prefects* (London: Spring Books, 1923), p.90
- 5 Dorita Fairlie Bruce, *Captain of Springdale* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), p.136
- 6 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *Mary-Lou of the Chalet School* (London, Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1956), p.131
- 7 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *Leader in Spite of Herself* (London, Edinburgh : Oliphants Ltd, 1956) p.45
- 8 *ibid.* p.86
- 9 Dorothy Dennison, *The Rebellion of the Upper Fifth* (London: Girl's Own Paper, 1919)
- 10 Dorothy Dennison, *The Rival Schools at Trentham* (London: C.S.S.M, 1923), p.25, 27
- 11 For example, Louisa Gray, whose writing in *Nelly's Teachers ... and what they learned* (London, Edinburgh, New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1882), and *Ada and Gerty or, hand in hand heavenward* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1875) shows a remarkable insight into the psychology of children brought up in deeply religious environments.
- 12 Helen S. Humphries, *Prudence Goes Too Far* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1966), p.9
- 13 Helen S. Humphries, *Margaret the Rebel* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1957), p.110
- 14 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *The Chalet School Reunion* (London, Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1963), p.77
- 15 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *New House at the Chalet School* (London, Edinburgh: W & R Chambers, rep. 1963), p.96. First published 1935.
- 16 Dorita Fairlie Bruce, *Nancy Calls the Tune* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p.178
- 17 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *Joey and Co. in Tirol.* (Edinburgh, London: W & R Chambers, 1960), p.65
- 18 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *The Coming of Age of the Chalet School* (London, Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1958), p.199
- 19 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer, *The Chalet School Does It Again* (London, Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1955), p.154
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Chapter Seven : LOVE ... LOVE ... LOVE...

The Woman-loving Woman : Female Friendship

Introduction

Women have traditionally been defined within society by their relations to men, partly as a result of the powerful discourses of science and theology, and partly because of their economic dependence which made marriage a financial necessity for the majority. In Victorian England, men and women operated in different spheres¹ and men, whose role was a public one, were rarely part of the domestic scene. Women lived in a different, private, world together, of course, with other women, and an important part of their lives was these relationships, which ranged from merely getting together to carry out their feminine pursuits in feminine company to deep romantic attachment, evidence of which exists from at least the time of the Renaissance onwards.²

The beginning of this century saw crucial changes in all these areas. Scientific knowledge developed, theology lost much of its social power, and the world of work outside the home began slowly to open up for middle-class women, giving them a financial independence which provided the option of a life without obligatory marriage. All this was positive, but at the same time sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Krafft-Ebing 'discovered' women's sexual responses, and redefined as diseased and problematic deep friendships between women which earlier generations had perceived as normal and even ennobling. The only constructs available to women seemed to be that of the woman-hater, caught in competition for men and incapable of true friendship, or the woman-lover, defined as latently lesbian and therefore perverted and sick.³

In the single-sex world of the school-story, female relationships are reclaimed, friendship is analysed and celebrated as the major element of life and vital to emotional and moral development, life without men is seen as a genuine and fulfilling option, and deep and abiding love between women is validated. Passion in heterosexual relationships is treated with deep suspicion as, given the unequal power-relations in society, it results in a loss of self for women. Passion in same-sex friendship is powerfully present, though it became impossible to articulate it in the climate created by the theories of the

sexologists. The texts do not depict sexual relationships, but do give strong images of female love, which is prioritised. Woman is not a half-finished human being, dependent on a man to complete and authenticate her existence, she stands complete alone.

Women as incomplete without men

The most fundamental presupposition of society has been that a woman without a man is incomplete, and this has its roots in science and theology which have both taught, as we have seen, that woman is a defective man. Such constructs have been deeply influential in women's perception of themselves, and were reinforced by the fact that marriage became for economically-disenfranchised women, not a relationship, but a career. Cicely Hamilton makes the point in her attack on the institution, *Marriage as a Trade*, first published in 1909, when she argues that, because men believe woman to be incomplete without them, they conclude that the only purpose of her existence is to find completeness through them, and that apart from this, 'the unfortunate creature is, for all practical purposes, non-existent'.⁴

The function of woman is to be available to man, and the single woman, however successful and independent, can still be labelled 'superfluous' by social commentators. The writings of the influential journalist W.R.Greg on the 'problem' of the large number of single women in the mid-nineteenth century are well-known, but Martha Vicinus points out that, in his calculations of 'redundant' women for his notorious article *Why Are Women Redundant?*, Greg eliminated domestic servants because they fulfilled both essentials of women's being; they were supported by, and they ministered to, men.⁵ Thus women's role with regard to men was one of self-effacement, servicing and submission.

This is clearly recognised in school-stories, where depictions of heterosexual relationships are frequently characterised by a strong element of submergence of personality and loss of selfhood. This is exemplified in *Whittenbury College* (1915) when artistic Isobel becomes engaged, and her immediate reaction is to give up painting in a gesture of renunciation.⁶ For Elinor Brent-Dyer's Grizel Cochrane, marriage means

disempowerment. Throughout the series, Grizel, the Chalet School's first pupil, has been a maverick, the one who is never assimilated. She has never been allowed her own story, having been forced by her father and step-mother into a career teaching music, which she hates (again because of economic powerlessness - her father refuses to finance her training in anything else), yet her very bitterness and frustration make her a strong character within the series, a useful corrective to the generic sweetness and light. Brent-Dyer is doing her perceived best for Grizel in reclaiming her by marrying her off in *The Chalet School Reunion*, the fiftieth book of the series, which was written as a celebration of the whole opus, but again Grizel's happiness is seen in terms of surrender, her cry of 'Am I to have no say in the matter?' being firmly squashed by Neil's masterful 'I want the right to take care of you, beloved'.⁷

The fact that Brent-Dyer herself perceived love as threatened loss of selfhood is shown in an unpublished poem entitled *Wife Woman*:

'Since I have wedded you and must for aye
Be yours, then learn that I am no man's slave!
Though I shall order all your home affairs
I must have freedom, my poor heart to save.

I will not rest in peace and quiet at home;
My ways shall be my own, if so I will ...
I will be all my own ...
For if I let you to my inmost heart
I fear lest you that inmost heart should hurt ...
Oh, I would hold you dearest if I dared ...'⁸

The fact that, for women, love and marriage equalled negation of self meant that they were a highly dangerous distraction for girls who were just, for the first time, being given, through education, the opportunity to find themselves and live their own story. For, undoubtedly, education was the most potent force in freeing women from the

expectations of marriage as the only possible narrative for their lives. D.H. Lawrence's Ursula (*The Rainbow*, 1915), at the end of her school career, works doggedly: 'An all-containing will in her for complete independence, complete social independence, complete independence from any personal authority, kept her dullishly at her studies.'⁹ For Lawrence, Ursula's desire to conquer the 'man's world' of daily work and duty, and to exist as a member of the working community, reveals a 'subtle grudge', but he does clearly state the connection between academic work and independence. Only as women gained, through education and training, economic independence, could they begin to choose their own narrative (and even then had to lose it when they did marry, being prevented, either legally or socially, from continuing to work), and the loss of this is seen as devastating, and to be avoided at all costs.

This is very specifically stated in *Betty Bruce - Beverly Scholar* (1926), where Betty is a brilliant violinist and her Headmistress, Miss Wyllie, foresees a great future for her - unless her career is ruined by an early marriage. Miss Wyllie overhears some gossip to the effect that Betty's parents are encouraging her friendship with the boy-cousin of one of her schoolfriends in the hope that she will eventually marry the rich and well-connected boy. The Head is horrified, and immediately bans all further outings, even for the boy's own cousin.¹⁰

For those who leave at sixteen, life is different, and Elinor Brent-Dyer points the contrast clearly. As far as the Chalet School is concerned, the girls are kept clear of such things while they are at school, so that they are not distracted.¹¹ On the other hand Moira, in *Kennelmaid Nan*¹², has a boyfriend at sixteen, but she has already started work, and Janice Chester speaks, in *Adrienne and the Chalet School*, of friends at home who are not as old as she, but have steady boyfriends.¹³ The strong implication in all this is, however, that the boyfriend life-style is second-best. Moira eventually discovers that her much older boyfriend has criminal tendencies, the relationship ends and she goes back to school, and Brent-Dyer is obviously in sympathy with Judy Willoughby, who puts the priorities right with bracing succinctness - 'I'd a lot rather win the Junior Tennis Championship next summer than go steeling round to dances with boys.'¹⁴

Because marriage spells the end of a certain degree of autonomy and choice, it has to take its place alongside other priorities. There is a definite feeling of 'where's the fun of getting married before you've had any *other* kind of fun.'¹⁵ Helen Watson's Peggy puts it in more esoteric terms as she expresses her longings for her own life, for new experiences and wider knowledge, to follow her own plans without having to depend on the will of someone else, 'to feel her own feet, and if possible to run some little way along a safe road by herself'.¹⁶

The above was written in 1911, and by 1938, when Josephine Elder published *Exile For Annis*, the concept is stated even more strongly. When, in answer to Annis's question as to what she wants to be, Kitty announces her intention to get married and have twenty children, her friend is scathing:

'That's not a thing you *be* ... You've got to be something before that, a teacher or a secretary or something like your mother was.'¹⁷

At last marriage and motherhood are relationships, not jobs.

All this is presenting priorities which are different from those of society at large, which has wished to trap girls within their own socially-constructed world of instinct and trivia. As late as 1963 the Newsom Report advocated structuring the education of adolescent girls around make-up and boyfriends, as these were perceived to be their main interests in life.¹⁸ Many writers of school-stories want instead to release them from this pathetically restricted universe.

The moral is underlined by Major Madge Unsworth of the Salvation Army in her book *Wilminster High School*. Perhaps it is unsurprising to find the Salvation Army being down to earth, but it is a little startling to find references in a girls' school-story of 1929 to 'two indistinct forms in the long grass'. Bridie has in fact left school by now, and is enduring loneliness, boredom, and a sense of purposelessness in her life in a small village. When her dog sniffs out the young teenagers, she tries to dismiss the incident with a scornful 'Pity they can't find something better to do',¹⁹ but realises that there is nothing at all for young people to do in Martindale, and that the youngsters are wrestling with the same problem as she, though their solutions are different. She is inspired to start a branch of the Life-Saving Guard Movement (a junior branch of the Salvation Army) in

the village, and illicit passion is firmly placed in the category of a time-wasting activity, rather than the most important event in the universe.

Girls who circumvent all restrictions and choose passion are punished, and countless examples of this span the decades, with retribution ranging from physical accidents through personal corruption to exclusion from the community. In May Wynne's *Term of Many Adventures* (1939), Retta and Gilda carry on illicit meetings with two boys in the neighbourhood until Gilda is involved in a motor accident on one of her evenings out,²⁰ and Angela Brazil's Cynthia Greene includes a note in a basket of strawberries sent to a soldier, then suffers weeks of anguish in case he replies and she is expelled (*Madcap of the School*, 1917). Cynthia avoids this fate (the whole incident is a joke), but Mrs. Herbert Martin's Mima Lewis, a rich, arrogant and obstinate girl who is the leader of the 'fast, frivolous-minded girls with inclinations to positive badness', is eventually compelled to live with the consequences of her choices when she elopes with the handsome singing-master and is excluded from the community.²¹

The process of distancing girls from passion was helped, too, by the fact that, in order to attain academic credibility, girls' schools were forced to model themselves on those for boys. Ideals of behaviour for boys were already well-established, all that remained was for the girls to fit themselves into the same paradigms, and bracing adjurations to 'buck up and be a man' abound. There is a rash of boyish heroines, who are identifiable by their cropped hair, boyish strides, continual whistling, and by their boys' names. Elinor Brent-Dyer has her Tom Gay and Jack Lambert, Phyllis Matthewman her Tony Falconer, and these and many others all have as their ideal a concept of 'gentlemanly' behaviour. For them, the question of boyfriends does not arise. It is impossible to imagine any of them thinking of boys in a romantic sense, and indeed Jack Lambert is horrified at the idea:

"I'm never going to be married. I think it's a lot of rot! ...

"But then, Jack, would you be an old maid? You cannot wish that!"

"You bet I do! You don't catch me having to run a house and do all the mending and look after the babies and all that."²²

These are the girls, too, who are given an interest in masculine subjects - Tom is keenly interested in woodwork, Jack in engineering. They have to disown their femininity in order to escape from the traditional expectations, but at least the alternatives are there, providing the possibility of liberation from the assumption that only in marriage can one find fulfilment and that unattached women are flawed failures.

Friendship in heterosexual relationships

If the self-surrender of passion has to be distanced in the interests of self-preservation, heterosexual relationships for both girls and women are seen in terms of friendship, with its implication of equality and sharing. In Sylvia Little's *Stanton's Pulls It Off* (1948), Tremartha is in close proximity to a large boys' school and contact between the schools is encouraged on the basis that healthy friendship between the sexes is valuable.²³ When Len Maynard of the Chalet School finally realises that she cares for Reg Entwistle and they become engaged, her reaction is that 'it all seems absolutely natural and very nice',²⁴ and for Alice Chesterton in *Whittenbury College*, friendship is more important than romance. Her heroine, Doris, is impressed by the affection between her colleague, Carola, and Carola's fiancé and begins to daydream about her own old friend, Allan, experimenting with perceiving the friendship as romance. When she sees him again, however, she realises how ridiculous she has been: 'many fanciful ideas and comparisons had her imagination drawn for her, but her little bubble of romance burst very quietly and even refreshingly when she met her old chum again'.²⁵ The end of the book gives a clear indication that Doris's future will lie with Allan, but it is signified, in a fascinating inversion of the Genesis image, by his silently joining in as her helper in the garden she has designed.

Josephine Elder's Annis and Adrian are affectionate friends, Dorita Fairlie Bruce's Dimsie refers to her fiancé as 'my mate,' and Elinor Brent-Dyer's Jo Bettany and Janie Lucy marry men with whom they have been friendly for years. Flirtations and infatuations are a cheapening of this. Dimsie grieves over her friend Rosamund's defection from the ideals of the Anti-Soppist Society of their schooldays and rails against

'this idiotic lovesick nonsense' on the basis 'if people would only wait until they can have the real thing - not play at it like Rosamund and some of the others'.²⁶

Female friendship

Heterosexual friendship, however, is ultimately of minor significance, as one of the major themes of school-stories is that of female strength and bonding as exemplified in friendships which are deep, lasting and of fundamental importance. At the beginning of term in Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Janeways*, the story of David and Jonathan is always read, and the Head comments that their hope is that the girls will find their first great friendship at school (*Caroline The Second*, 1937).²⁷

This viewpoint is shared by numerous fictional parents who find that the loneliness of their daughter is the decisive factor in their decision to send her to school. It is also endorsed by the girls themselves who, without exception, rate 'having a real chum' as one of the best parts of school life, and this is another of the themes that surfaces, unchanged, decade after decade. Lonely Princess Alix (*A Runaway Princess*, 1912) dreams of school-life and 'the charms of hairbrushing in company',²⁸ while A.M.Irvine's Jo (*Quiet Margaret*, 1935) imagines school as 'a place of charming comradeship where lifelong friendships were made'.²⁹ The theme spans many generations of schoolgirls; in 1906 Angela Brazil's Phillipa is sent to school to find 'friends of my own age and station,' and her sentiments are still being at least half-echoed in 1949 when Susan Lambert (*Ponies At Westways* : Constance White) sighs that 'friends of one's own age was what one wanted most'.³⁰ The same thought is still powerfully active almost ten years later, when we are told that Nina Rutherford, the Chalet School's musical genius, 'had missed a great deal... she had never had a great friend'³¹.

The obvious reason why these girls can find such friendships only at school is the greater opportunity provided by a larger community, but there is something deeper at work here, too. It is significant that *Janeways'* Head has to present her girls with David

and Jonathan, a model of *male* friendship, for all the classic deep friendships were, indeed, male; women were traditionally seen in relation to men, rarely to each other.

It is noteworthy that Jonathan's love for David is specifically defined as 'surpassing the love of women' (2 Sam. 1 v 26). As society arranged its structures so that a husband was an economic necessity for the vast majority of women, an element of competition was introduced into female relationships which eventually grew into the myth that women were emotionally shallow, incapable of deep friendship, of loyalty and love towards one another, caught in perpetual patterns of criticism and back-biting, the eternal bitch, the archetypal cat. Women internalised the myth, and believed this of one another. Linda Blandford claims, reminiscing about her own public school:

'Stick girls together and they'll turn all their talents in on each other towards mutual destruction ... But cast one spotty boy into a room full of these same catty girls and they'll suddenly turn into amusing, funny, civilised people.'³²

For many women, deep female friendship became acutely threatening. Janet Todd recounts in her *Feminist Literary History* the reaction of Anita Brookner, who reviewed a book by Todd on the subject of women's friendship in literature. In this review, male rape is seen as more positive, and certainly more 'natural,' than female love. For Brookner, Todd's celebration of the supportive role of women is distasteful and inappropriate; their role is to teach one another how to please men, then efface themselves so that the heterosexual relationship can flourish. Brookner points out that in fairy tales the heroine is rescued from the wicked *women* in her life (step-sisters, step-mother) by the male hero, and sees this as a natural line of growth which cannot be deviated from without danger. Female bonding is undesirable because it hinders the progress towards marriage.³³

Friendship analysed - a sentimental education

It is these attitudes and the heteroreality which they create which are strongly challenged by school-stories, for they set against this basic assumption a formidable antithesis; girls isolated in the school community can afford to ignore the pressures of society, and the

books are in many ways a celebration of female love. True friendship is a very important element in emotional development; 'This interest in other people as well as in facts was part of growing up'³⁴ and, as such, it is a necessity. Valerie Hey, in her sociological study of girls' friendships,³⁵ defines friendship as the constitution of self, the means of establishing both individual and collective identity, and this is echoed in Elinor Brent-Dyer's words, 'we need [friends] or we don't grow properly'³⁶. Brent-Dyer's Con Maynard inherits her mother's writing talents, but not Jo's sensitivity to other people. Con is totally absorbed in her fictional world, and the emotional satisfaction which this gives her prevents her from making effective contact with the other girls. Her point of maturity is reached when her 'story-book people' fail to satisfy her, and she begins to reach out to the other girls in friendship.

As friendship is so closely bound up with emotional development, many authors trace the process of emotional maturing through crises which form, in varying degrees, both an analysis of friendship and a sentimental education for both the characters and the readers. The most popular theme is that of possessiveness and jealousy, the constant questioning of relationship ('Did Kitty like her as much as she liked Kitty?') characteristic of an introspective and insecure stage of development. This has deeper implications, too; Hey has found that the sense of belonging to a friendship group is bought at the price of the exclusion of others (it is obvious that, for 'belonging' to be at all meaningful, there must be those who do not belong), and the whole relationship is itself the site of sometimes vicious struggles for power.³⁷ School-stories provide both a recognition of and a challenge to the concept of belonging as exclusion.

D.F.Bruce has a particular understanding of the process of perceived exclusion. She returns constantly to this area, and almost all her books include a clouding of the relationship between two friends because of jealousy of another person. Nancy Caird's alliance with Desda Blackett, for example, is more than once threatened by the 'lame ducks' whom Nancy tries to help. Nancy neglects Desda in her efforts to befriend those who seem to need it, and Desda feels slighted as a result.³⁸ Elinor Brent-Dyer, too, demonstrates the deeply destructive effects of the jealousy that perceives belonging as exclusion. Margot Maynard is so jealous of her sister's friendship with a new girl

(*Theodora at the Chalet School*) that she plans a campaign to discredit Ted. She obtains, by eavesdropping, some information concerning the other girl's rather murky past, and from then on her behaviour becomes more and more indefensible until it is positively cruel and immoral - and almost ends in her own expulsion.

The challenge to the construct consists in the presentation of jealousy as an extremely powerful and destructive emotion; at its least damaging it stifles affection and puts an intolerable strain on a friendship. Josephine Elder questions the whole concept of belonging when, in *Cherry Tree Perch*, Kitty is infuriated and suffocated by Annis's jealousy of her new friend:

'I *must* have other friends as well, and you *must* let me without being hurt about it! I don't *belong* to you or to anyone!'³⁹

Rosemary Auchmuty has pointed out that, while special friendships between girls are common in the work of Elsie Oxenham and Dorita Fairlie Bruce, 'it is rare for Brent-Dyer to feature heroines who have only one special friend'.⁴⁰ Twosomes are rarely positive experiences for the girls involved who, almost inevitably, have a bad influence on each other, and 'triumvirates', quartets and groups are much more common. Jo Bettany, the heroine of the series, is herself part of a foursome with Marie von Eschenau, Frieda Mensch and Simone Lecoutier, and this alliance is life-long.

For women who have so often been taught that relationship consists solely in 'belonging to' someone, this breadth and freedom in relationship is a vital concept, and the same point is stressed elsewhere in the *Chalet* series. Mary-Lou Trelawney and Clem Barras are placed in different forms in the school, and inevitably make different friends. Mary-Lou finds that this merely makes them 'better pals,' and her grandmother points the moral in an extended lecture on the benefits of sharing one's friends and the dangers to the relationship of possessiveness.⁴¹

If relationships are the means by which we develop our own sense of self, they are also the agents which form our moral responses to life, and this has even been seen as an area of major difference between modern and post-modern philosophy: 'In modern ethics, the Other was the contradiction incarnate and the most awesome of stumbling-blocks on the self's march to fulfilment ... postmodernity is ... an ethics that recasts the

Other as the crucial character in the process through which the moral self comes into its own.'⁴²

Hey recognises, too, the moral dimension of friendship: 'The central premises of girls' friendship are: reliability, reciprocity, commitment, confidentiality, trust and sharing,'⁴³ and the ability to 'do' friendship is a moral one. Certainly in school-stories friendship denotes more than personal fulfilment; there is a moral value attached to the offering of it. Mrs. De Horne Vaizey's Pixie O'Shaunessy wins a prize at school at the turn of the century for having 'never failed to show the most generous and unselfish friendship'⁴⁴ and this motif was taken up by a number of later writers, amongst them Elinor Brent-Dyer and Phyllis Matthewman. From the same concept grew the convention of the heroine who befriends the outcast of the school.

The most straightforward outworking of this convention occurs in the situation where the heroine, through her friendship, reveals the hitherto unsuspected value of the lonely girl. The main character in A.M.Irvine's *Quiet Margaret* is an outcast because of her inflexible and uncompromising stand for what is right, and she is mellowed and made more human (though not less upright) by the affection of Jo. Both E.L.Haverfield's *Discovery of Kate* (1925) and Brenda Page's *Joan And The Scholarship Girl* (1931) deal with heroines who discover the true value of girls rejected by the others because of misunderstandings.

However, making a friend of an outcast is not always a noble proceeding. E.L.Haverfield's Alison (*Blind Loyalty*, 1900) and Ethel Talbot's Meriel (*Jean's Two Schools*, 1930) both find that the girls whom they have championed have been rejected by the others for very good reasons. Alison gradually discovers that Esme cheats, lies and steals, while Meriel's friend Sybil is vindictive, vengeful and dishonest. Both Esme and Sybil are ultimately expelled, but, although they have forfeited the respect of their friends, they do not lose their love. It is the fact that Alison and Meriel can know the worst about them and yet love them which causes a change of heart in both girls; thus friendship is not only of moral value, it is actually redemptive:

'I think I've a chance of being a better girl, and I may make a good thing of my life after all, because I once had a true friend.'⁴⁵

Good does not always triumph, however. If friendship can be a force for moral good, it can equally operate as a force for evil. Madge Nethersole, in Margaret Kilroy's *Study Number Eleven* (1911), befriends outsider Jean Inglis and discovers an outstanding literary talent, drawing Jean from her loneliness into the full life of the school. So far, all is well, but Jean's unhappy home life has restricted her sympathies and lowered her moral standards. Her influence on Madge, and Madge's affection for her, are so great that Jean eventually undermines Madge's own rigid standards until Madge herself is responsible for encouraging younger girls to lie and cheat. Jean leaves the school rather than cause the other girl further harm; she makes a new life for herself in New Zealand and Madge is restored to the straight and narrow, but the point has been made that relationships can be deeply damaging.⁴⁶

Celebration of female love

Valid as all the above may be, it ignores an aspect of female friendship which perhaps explains its suppression and invisibility, even in the memories of women themselves. Valerie Hey, whose study was undertaken to investigate those very elements, speaks of the passion such relationships involve: 'The repertoire of emotions that are provoked ... are as powerfully felt and as dramatic as those that have characteristically been claimed as the sole prerogative of sexualised relations.'⁴⁷ Rosemary Auchmuty, who has already produced a detailed and definitive analysis of friendship in the texts in her *World of Girls* (1992), has claimed that 'to dip into the early volumes of [Elsie Oxenham's *Abbey* series] is to be transported into a world where women's love for women is openly and unselfconsciously avowed on almost every page',⁴⁸ and certainly the texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are full of emotionally intense and physically demonstrative friendships which are expressed in terms which were obviously totally acceptable to contemporary readers.

In Angela Brazil's *Fourth Form Friendship* (1912), Aldred saves her great friend from a school fire at great risk to her own life, and Mabel comes to thank her, expressing her unworthiness of such love which would gladly give its life for the beloved.⁴⁹ Ruth

Craven (*Rebel of the School*, 1902) has to refuse to join the secret society of her wild Irish friend, and Kathleen's reaction is full of passionate drama as she bursts into tears and flings her arms around Ruth's neck, crying, 'in the whole of England I only love you, and you are going to give me up.'⁵⁰

The whole concept of falling in love had a much wider application. In *Rebel of the School*, Cassandra tells Ruth of her affection: 'As a rule I am not fond of what schoolgirls call falling in love... but I love you. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you'⁵¹, and Mrs. Martin's Princess Otilia (*Loneliest Girl in the School* : 1880s) goes to a dreary, heartless boarding-school and makes one true friend, another Ruth, a sensible girl who had never made absorbing friendships until meeting Otilia, when she 'had fallen in love with the fairy princess'⁵².

Some passages are much more specific. Elsie Oxenham tells us in *The Abbey Girls Win Through* (1928) that 'Con and Norah were a recognised couple. Con.... was the wife and homemaker, Norah.... the husband', while L.T.Meade and Angela Brazil's girls express their love in physical terms. Meade's Poppy and Elizabeth kiss and fondle each other and sob 'I want you' as they get into bed together,⁵³ and in Angela Brazil's *Loyal to the School* we are told that Regina loved Lesbia almost as a boy would, for her pretty hair, her dainty movements, and her Celtic glamour, and that she behaved more like a youth in love than an ordinary schoolgirl friend.⁵⁴

Intimate friendships

Our modern consciousness immediately designates such relationships as undoubtedly, if latently, lesbian, but in their historical context intimate friendships between women were perfectly acceptable, and even encouraged, and in overcrowded households, siblings and friends shared a bed as a matter of course.

Authors of adult fiction in the early years of the century were also portraying 'the tender and adoring friendship of women for women', and Elaine Showalter, in her survey of women's fiction *A Literature Of Their Own*, sees this as reflecting the intense bonding together of women who represent an oppressed subculture in loyalty and love which

changes the character of that oppression. It is beyond doubt that, as Showalter stresses, these intimate friendships were seen as perfectly proper and even elevating.⁵⁵

Sheila Jeffreys in *The Spinster and her Enemies*,⁵⁶ Rosemary Auchmuty in *A World of Girls* and Lillian Faderman, in *Surpassing the Love of Men*, have shown that such deep and demonstrative friendships were considered ennobling and desirable for women and seen as being enriching and supportive (a woman's best friend would frequently accompany her on honeymoon) until the conjunction of economic and philosophical forces made them such a threat that they had to be exterminated. We have already noted how the 1920s saw the growth of economic independence for women which made it possible for women to choose not to marry, while, at the same time, the sexologists 'discovered' female sexuality, inserted it into all close friendships, and defined lesbianism as a disease. Rosemary Auchmuty has traced the difference in attitude in Elsie Oxenham's books from the 1920s to the 1930s, as women who had previously been emotionally centred on their friends were firmly redirected towards men and marriage, and it is difficult to avoid agreeing with her conclusion that the trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well Of Loneliness* in 1928 must have been significant, making all close friendships between women suspect. The thought of women choosing to live without men (despite the fact that only very small numbers were then making that choice) could not be tolerated.

The 'crush.'

A further element which joined with the above changes to outlaw the possibilities of articulating affection was the fact that, with girls' schools trying so hard to model themselves on those for boys, there was, as we have seen, great stress on being 'manly,' and, David and Jonathan notwithstanding, this in twentieth century society meant an unwillingness to show emotion or form relationship.

By the 1930s the general feeling was in sympathy with Josephine Elder's Kitty when she remarks to Annis that they know each other well enough not to have to demonstrate their affection publicly:

'We know we're friends, there isn't any need to parade it in front of everybody.'⁵⁷

In this new climate, passion was firmly deleted from all relationships, as was all physical contact; the girls of Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Skelton Hall* (1962) are allowed to link arms only in a gale.⁵⁸ Any expressions of affection cause great embarrassment, and 'crushes' and 'G.Ps' are definitely taboo.

This attitude to the 'crush' suggests a further attempt to define passionate affection between women as ridiculous or dangerous, for, at first glance, the extravagances of the crush seem to parallel closely the passionate outpourings of earlier years. Crushes certainly receive drastic treatment from the authors. Nancy Breary's *St. Anne's (A School Divided : 1944)* is suffering from a 'wave of sentimental silliness that is splashing about in the school and drenching quite half of it'. The popular Head Girl has herself been the victim of several crushes, and is determined to put a stop to it. Accordingly, her treatment of Barbara, whom she catches in the act of bringing her flowers, is bracing in the extreme, as she rejects the offerings, suggesting instead that the girl might get up early, run round the garden a few times, and train to become a decent cricketer.⁵⁹

Elinor Brent-Dyer leaves her readers in equally little doubt as to what their attitude should be. The Juniors of St. Peter's (*Head Girl's Difficulties : 1926*) are encouraged by a new girl, Adelicia, to indulge in excessive sloppiness and, because their behaviour is obsessive and inappropriate, the Prefects have to take drastic steps; Rosamund Atherton, the Head Girl of the title, makes the juniors read out publicly the effusions which they have written to each other and thus embarrasses them into subjection.

Barbara and Adelicia are taken in hand, the former by the St. Anne's Juniors, the latter by her own Sixth Form compeers at St. Peter's, and both are deluged with fake gifts and adulatory verses until they are humiliated into reason.

All this sounds extremely rational and sensible, but, as Rosemary Auchmuty has pointed out, authors never actually articulate what is wrong with a crush. The fears of psychologists and sexologists were undoubtedly of the development of lesbian relationships, but there is no indication whatsoever that any of the authors of the texts were even remotely aware of this element. I am in complete agreement with Auchmuty's conclusion that, although the crush is spoken of in terms of disease and corruption,

nothing of any true emotional content is actually happening at all - 'there is an absence of sincere feeling throughout the account, and no sensible rationale for the aberrant behaviour. The adorations are ... completely fake ... Sentimentality in the abstract has nothing to do with love.'⁶⁰

The characteristic of a 'crush' is that it is unreciprocated and uncontrolled affection. It is not in any way a real relationship, and, indeed, became in many schools, both real and fictional, merely a fashionable way to behave, thus creating its own oppression. It became, too, a handy means of ridiculing the overt displays of affection which had been considered normal in an earlier era, conveniently ignoring the fact that they had been expressions of sincere feeling. Aldred *has* risked her life to rescue Mabel from the fire, Ruth *does* come to the very brink of expulsion because of her refusal to betray Kathleen. Concentration on the meaningless emotional explosion of the crush reinforced the principle that friendship between women was either lacking in emotional expression or dangerous.

The advantage of the crush was that it operated as a smokescreen, and its extravagance allowed extremely close relationships based on respect and liking to appear totally normal in comparison.

Admiration for an older girl or mistress is allowable if it is free from 'silliness.' Dorita Fairlie Bruce's Primula deeply admires the Sixth Form Diana, but Primula is a level-headed little girl, and the relationship grows into a 'sensible working friendship', not a 'silly adoration'.⁶¹ Josephine Elder points the contrast in *Evelyn Finds Herself* between the 'crush' which many of the Juniors feel for Madeleine and the friendship between Evelyn and Liz and the previous Head Girl, Jennifer. Jennifer's interest has actively helped the emotional development of the younger girls, she has set a high standard of behaviour for them to follow and when, in the course of the book, Evelyn herself becomes Head Girl, she takes on the same role towards her own juniors.⁶²

The same feeling of responsibility is apparent in Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Tom Tackles the Chalet School* (1955), where Daisy Venables becomes aware that Tom Gay has developed a great admiration for her, and is horrified at the implications of influence. Later in the series, Jack Lambert nurses a similar admiration for Len Maynard. Len

appears to have broken a promise to Jack and her coterie, and the younger girls take this as an excuse for flagrant rule-breaking of their own.⁶³ Jack is another of Elinor Brent-Dyer's boyish heroines, and again we have to be assured that there is nothing in the least 'soppy' in her feelings for Len.

The sexual expression of same-sex love depends on many different factors, awareness of the possibility, the attitudes of one's particular society, personal beliefs about the boundaries of sexuality. There are modern novels for adults which specifically use as part of their theme the lesbian love of schoolgirls, from the gentle, tentative experimentation of Janice Elliott's *Secret Places*(1989)⁶⁴ to the destructive passion of Sylvie in Eveline Mahyere's *I Will Not Serve*(1984),⁶⁵ but school-stories are not amongst them. Sex is never on the agenda, but the love itself is never questioned. It was, after all, true to the experience of the authors themselves. Gillian Freeman has shown in her biography of Angela Brazil (*The Schoolgirl Ethic* : 1976) that her friendships, though few, were passionate, all-consuming and lifelong. The 'mysterious and powerful quality of friendship' is very important in all her books and 'invisible bonds draw together members of the female sex in implicit understanding and uncompromising love'.⁶⁶

It is clear from Elinor Brent-Dyer's biography, too, both that she felt a great need of friendship and that she was unable to sustain relationships at the level necessary to satisfy her undoubtedly emotional nature; friendships formed in a white heat of fervour almost inevitably cooled and disappeared.⁶⁷ Perhaps it was this need in herself which caused her to depict again and again adult friendships which are deep and lasting, and this is an aspect of her work which rewards further examination, for she is the paramount creator of strong and permanent adult bonding.

Adult friendships

Brent-Dyer is unusual in the extent of her use of adult focalizers in the text, but this is important, for it is the adults who have completed the process of maturation and are able to present true alternatives for living to the reader. Miss Annersley and Miss Wilson, joint Heads of the school, live fulfilled and autonomous lives as single women; Rosalie

Dene, the school's indefatigable secretary, rejects marriage, claiming to be happy as she is,⁶⁸ and the same decision is made by Kathy Ferrars with her claim of being a born teacher and wanting nothing else.

Kathy finds her emotional fulfilment in her deep friendship with her colleague Nancy Wilmot, Hilda Annersley relates similarly to Nell Wilson, and this is significant.

The theme of mistresses who are 'the closest of friends' is present from the earliest books with Miss Catchside and Miss Phillips in *Head Girl's Difficulties* (1923) and Miss Carthew and Miss Miles in *Judy The Guide* (1928), and reaches its height in the *Chalet* series with the relationships between first Miss Wilson and Miss Annersley and later Kathy Ferrars and Nancy Wilmot who take over, in the later books, the roles of the now ageing Heads.

Auchmuty has provided an in depth analysis of the development of the relationship between Nancy Wilmot and Kathy Ferrars, and there are definite parallels between this and the treatment of Nell Wilson, in particular. She is, from the start of the series, part of a recognised twosome, first with Con Stewart, the History mistress at the school; then, after the latter's marriage and departure from the books, with the headmistress, Hilda Annersley. The build-up of relationship is very gradual and almost part of the background of the texts, an intimacy implied in tiny incidents and details. In *The New Chalet School* (1938), for example, the book opens with Con Stewart being described as 'her [Nell Wilson's] great chum'.⁶⁹ The two have been involved in listening to a boring tale of woe from a colleague and Miss Stewart complains, 'I was nearly asleep before it ended, and Nell would keep on pinching me sub rosa. My arm was black and blue over that affair'.⁷⁰ At the end of the staff meeting the pair go off together to the lab, where Miss Stewart is going to help her friend make out her stock-list and 'with a jolly laugh, [Miss Wilson] caught Miss Stewart's hand and raced her through the corridors to the laboratories, which lay at the far end of the school'.⁷¹ Later in the book a party of girls led by Miss Wilson and Miss Stewart is stranded overnight in a coach and Con Stewart, trying to reach over sleeping girls to open a window, whispers, 'Hold me, Nell, in case I slip'.⁷²

There is an element, if not of sexuality, then of role-playing in the relationships. Nell Wilson, like Nancy Wilmot, becomes more masculine as the series progresses. Auchmuty says of Nancy, 'Suddenly she is six feet tall, with 'long arms' and 'powerful shoulders' ... and a dab hand with the lasso'⁷³ and, while the process is less obvious in the case of Miss Wilson, it is definitely there. Her nickname ('Bill') and the fact that she is a Science teacher immediately put Miss Wilson on a masculine spectrum. She is a ferocious disciplinarian ('Best send Nell Wilson out to them ... it needs someone like a sergeant-major'),⁷⁴ and it is she who knows enough about electricity to cope with the failed lights:

'I know there's something wrong with the lights ... Miss Wilson will be along presently, and will see what is wrong ... someone has taken all the fuses out of the fuse-box, and cut some wire or other. Miss Wilson has put in new fuses, but the light is still out'.⁷⁵ In *Tom Tackles the Chalet School* (1948) we find her coming to 'stand in a manly attitude before the glowing fire'.⁷⁶

Brent-Dyer was writing too late for expressions of love to be at all acceptable as part of ordinary life. The only occasion when Nancy Wilmot actually expresses her affection for Kathy is when the latter is in the throes of an acute attack of appendicitis⁷⁷, and it is a similar crisis which, in earlier years, evokes a like response from Nell Wilson. Both she and Miss Annersley have been involved in a car accident, and Miss Annersley is badly injured. The school has to appoint a temporary Head, who proves to be a disaster, and Jo Maynard writes a frantic letter to Miss Wilson, who is recovering from a broken leg, begging her to come back. 'Bill' does so, only to find Jo herself, who has been helping out by teaching at the school, about to walk out after a violent argument with Miss Bubb. Deciding that shock tactics are necessary, Nell Wilson speaks of her own feelings about Hilda Annersley, who has been near to death:

'I knew I was very fond of her; but it wasn't till then that I realised how dearly I loved her ... If I had lost her, I suppose I could have gone on somehow; but I'd always have felt that part of me was dead.'⁷⁸

Brent-Dyer remarks that 'it is safe to say that never had anyone before heard such a thing from the lips of self-contained, unemotional Miss Wilson' - nor does anyone ever

again. Nell Wilson, one of the most convincingly drawn of all Elinor Brent-Dyer's characters, is indeed an entirely down-to-earth and unemotional woman, and this one statement of affection, coming from her, is a sincere and moving affirmation of love. Ultimately, however, Brent-Dyer seems unsure as to what to do with this relationship. The above passage occurs in a book published in 1944. We discover in *Three Go to the Chalet School* (1949) that Miss Wilson has become co-Head with Miss Annersley (presumably because of the latter's serious illness following the accident in *Gay from China* - the reason is never stated), but the effect is clumsy and lasts for only five books. In *The Wrong Chalet School* (1952), Miss Wilson has been banished to the school's finishing branch in Switzerland. This is a pity as, apart from relegating one of Brent-Dyer's most attractive characters to the sidelines, it breaks the strong relationship between the two women. Apart from odd comments that 'The Abbess is missing Bill',⁷⁹ we hear very little more of them, even after the school returns to Switzerland, and it is not until 1957 that Kathy Ferrars arrives at the school (*New Mistress at the Chalet School*) and her friendship with Nancy Wilmot begins.

Conclusion

Thus, in the area of relationships, school-stories are again acting as deeply interrogative texts, questioning and providing alternatives to, some of the most fundamental constructs of our society.

Our assumptions relative to heterosexual relationships (and, indeed, to the very position of men and women as inhabitants of the universe) are challenged in a move from seeing women's role within them as being one of self-effacement, servicing and submission to the much greater equality implied by concepts of friendship.

Passion in heterosexual relationships is certainly denied, but this is done in an attempt to avoid the loss of self inherent in such emotions in a society where power relations between the sexes are not equal, and where married women have traditionally been subsumed into their husbands, economically, emotionally and legally.

Passionate love within female relationships is recognised and celebrated, at first freely and openly, then in more covert ways as the articulation of such feelings became unacceptable, and the feelings themselves were labelled deviant. Such friendship is seen as a mainspring of life, vital to emotional health and personal growth, and able to give total fulfilment. Finally it is possible to conceive of the liberating image of the woman who loves women and derives her emotional and practical support and self-definition from them, a universe where women can choose to remain unattached to a man without being perceived as flawed failures, doomed to an emotional half-life.

The texts prioritise female friendship in a way unique in any sort of literature until the growth over recent years of lesbian fiction, which also, obviously, foregrounds love between women. Many women would not choose to read, or would feel unable to identify with, the latter, with its stress on a sexual relationship, yet it is arguable that this emotional fulfilment, denied to them elsewhere, has been (albeit at a level beyond conscious articulation) one of the most potent elements in the addiction of many intelligent, mature adult women to school-stories. Sex is not important in this context, but love is. Whether women wish to express their love sexually or not is a matter of individual choice, but to recognise that love, to admit it, to stop fearing it and, instead, to celebrate it, is to subvert the image of the half-person, of the defective human being, and to become truly whole.

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- 2 Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (London: The Women's Press, 1985), p.16
- 3 see Auchmuty *World of Girls*, Chapter 6 for a detailed analysis of this development.
- 4 Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1981), p.21. First published 1909 by Chapman Hall
- 5 Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women : Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London: Virago Press, 1985), p.4
- 6 Alice M. Chesterton, *Whittenbury College* (London, Edinburgh, New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1915)
- 7 Brent-Dyer, *The Chalet School Reunion*, Chambers, 1963, p.203
- 8 Unpublished poem, property of Helen McClelland.
- 9 D.H. Lawrence. *The Rainbow* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949), p.334. First published William Heinemann, 1915
- 10 M.C.Ramsay, *Betty Bruce, Beverly Scholar* (London: The Pilgrim Press, 1926), p.113
- 11 Brent-Dyer, *Prefects of the Chalet School*, p.67
- 12 Elinor Brent-Dyer, *Kennelmaid Nan* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1964)
- 13 Brent-Dyer, *Adrienne and the Chalet School*, Chambers, 1965, p.45
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 Helen H. Watson, *Peggy, S.G.* (London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Cassell and Company, 1911), p.267
- 17 Josephine Elder, *Exile For Annis* (London and Glasgow: The Children's Press, 1954), p.62. First published 1938
- 18 Ministry of Education, *Half Our Future: A Report of the Central Advisory Council for Education* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963)
- 19 Major Madge Unsworth, *Wilminster High School* (London: Salvationist Publishing and Supplies Ltd. 1929), p.133/134
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- 24 Brent-Dyer, *Prefects of the Chalet School*, p.167
- 25 Chesterton, *Whittenbury College*, p.172
- 26 Dorita Fairlie Bruce, *Dimsie Grows Up* (London, Edinburgh, Glasgow, New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), p.101. First published 1924
- 27 Brent-Dyer, *Caroline the Second*, (London: Girls' Own Paper Office, 1937)
- 28 Dorothea Moore, *A Runaway Princess* (London: S.W.Partridge & Co, 1912), p.33
- 29 A.M.Irvine, *Quiet Margaret* (London: S.W.Partridge & Co, 1935), p.49
- 30 Constance White, *Ponies at Westways* (London, Melbourne, Sydney, New York: Hutchinson & Co, 1959), p.112. First published 1949.
- 31 Brent-Dyer, *A Genius at the Chalet School*, Chambers, 1956, p.14
- 32 Linda Blandford, 'The Making of a Lady' in *The World Of The Public School* : George Macdonald Fraser (ed.) (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977)
- 33 Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p.10/11
- 34 Josephine Elder, *Cherry Tree Perch* (London and Glasgow: The Children's Press, 1954), p.76. First published 1939.
- 35 Valerie Hey, *The Company She Keeps : An ethnography of girls' friendship* (Buckingham, Philadelphia : Open University Press, 1997)
- 36 Brent-Dyer, *Theodora at the Chalet School*, p.120
- 37 Hey, *The Company She Keeps*, p.13

- 38 for example, D.F.Bruce, *The New Girl and Nancy* (Oxford University Press, 1926), *Nancy to the Rescue*, (OUP, 1927)
- 39 Elder, *Cherry Tree Perch*, p.176
- 40 Auchmuty, *A World of Girls*, p.108
- 41 Brent-Dyer, *Three Go To the Chalet School* (Chambers, 1949, p.221)
- 42 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford UK, Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1993), p.84
- 43 Hey, p.65
- 44 Mrs. George De Horne Vaizey (Jessie Mansergh), *Pixie O'Shaunessy* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1902), p.311
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- 46 Margaret Kilroy, *Study Number Eleven* (London: Partridge, 1911)
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- 48 *Trouble And Strife*, vol 10, Spring 1987, p.25
- 49 Angela Brazil, *A Fourth Form Friendship* (London, Glasgow and Bombay: Blackie and Sons, 1912), p.255
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- 51 L.T.Meade, *The Rebel of the School*, p.308
- 52 Mrs. Herbert Martin, *The Loneliest Girl in the School*, p.74
- 53 L.T.Meade, *The School Favourite* (London, Glasgow : W&R Chambers, 1908)
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- 62 Josephine Elder, *Evelyn finds Herself* (London, Glasgow, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1952). First published 1929.
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- 69 Brent-Dyer, *The New Chalet School*, 1938, p.9
- 70 *ibid.* p.17
- 71 *ibid.* p.24
- 72 *ibid.* p.287
- 73 Auchmuty, p.130
- 74 Brent-Dyer, *The New Chalet School*, p.127
- 75 *ibid.* pp.135-137
- 76 Brent-Dyer, *Tom Tackles the Chalet School*, p.168
- 77 Brent-Dyer, *A Challenge for the Chalet School*, 1966
- 78 Brent-Dyer, *Gay from China at the Chalet School* Chambers, 1950, p.122 (First published 1944)
- 79 Brent-Dyer, *Shocks for the Chalet School*, p.22

Conclusion

Girls' school-stories are dangerous; they change lives. It is one of the clichés of feminism that the personal is political, and evidence of the transforming power of the texts can be seen in the history of the writing of this thesis. It is often true for women that any search for a different reality from that offered by society comes as a result of painful personal experience. We all to some extent internalise and believe what society tells us about who we are and what we should do with our lives, and it is only when the construct does not fit that we are impelled to look for the cracks in the ideological membrane. I initially wanted to analyse the books because I was completely bewildered by my own obsession with them. I was quite unable to understand why I, as a reasonably intelligent, mature, professional adult, wanted to read nothing but school-stories, and finding that I was only one of a large number of women was comforting on a personal level (I had begun seriously to question my own emotional stability), but no more comprehensible. I was ashamed of a need which felt like addiction, but my craving for the stories was so great that, while waiting to obtain books on the second-hand market, I spent hours of my limited time secretly writing my own, and continued to do so for years. My attempt to understand school-stories was thus an attempt to understand myself, but it was not until I discovered feminism that I found the structure of thought which enabled me to realise what had really been happening, and why these texts had assumed such importance in the emotional life of myself and so many others. That structure forms the basis of the arguments in this thesis.

Looking back now on my own writing during those years it is very clear that I was searching for an expression of connection and love between women which had been extremely important in my life, but which society denied me as soon as I had a husband and family. They were supposed to be enough for all my emotional needs, but, in fact, although I loved them dearly, they were not. I missed women. This is so clear to me now that I find it difficult to believe that I was so unaware of my own feelings at the time. I had also, as a lifelong committed Christian, absorbed the teaching that a good wife found her fulfilment in her home and family, and that to want anything else was

sinful, and was making myself suicidally unhappy trying to fit into a mould which was not mine. The relief of finding that my unhappiness was not the fault of my own inadequacy as a woman and that it was the structure that was wrong, not me, was unspeakable. Thus the theories explored by the thesis are not intellectual games, but practical, life-changing, even life-saving truths which are revolutionising women and making them whole - and I use the present tense advisedly, as the process is by no means complete.

Wholeness was something we desperately needed, for a secondary and supplementary place in the universe has been central to our society's perception of women, and has been underpinned by discourses of power in the fields of science, theology, medicine and the law. These have been accepted by women themselves, and still retain enough power to be deeply damaging.

We have seen how the discourse of theology reduced women to an afterthought, put on earth to complement and serve men and incapable of attaining any sort of completion within themselves. As they were also the source and epitome of all evil, male headship was right and proper, and this was not merely an aberration of the early church fathers, but is still taught as a God-given norm in many sections of the church. Indeed, the modern approach is more insidious than the ancient; at least the bishops who had to decide, at the Council of Maçon in the 6th century, whether women had souls (the motion was carried by one vote), were honest in their misogyny.¹ We are now told that we are equal in value but different in function, the theory which also justified the implementation of apartheid. Such doctrines are shored up by the image of a totally male God which prioritises the masculine in an anthropomorphic representation of the deity which ignores the multiplicity of imagery in the Bible itself, or, if it cannot ignore, reinterprets it; we are told that God might be *like* a mother, but 'he' *is* a father - again the true image is male, the feminine is secondary and partial. Woman cannot be whole.

Medical discourse, too, has defined the feminine as diseased and problematic, unstable and unclean, with all normal but specifically female functions being described as disorders needing treatment. We have seen how medical ideology urged that women's finite energy should be channelled into childbirth, with any sort of intellectual or

physical activity being perceived as a threat to the future generation. It is the role of the woman to put aside all desire for personal growth and fulfilment and to devote herself to bearing and bringing up children and looking after her husband; anything else is dangerous to her health. Such theories now cause nothing but a slightly horrified amusement, but constructs of femininity are still inscribed upon the bodies of women. It is women who support the multi-million pound diet industry in their attempts to achieve the body decreed by society, it is women who undergo potentially dangerous cosmetic surgery, either in another attempt to attain the body beautiful, or to try to disguise the effects of ageing, which is again a problem only for women. The message has been that men's bodies are all right as they are, women's are not.

The discourses of theology and of medicine are extremely powerful, for they appear to be discourses of knowledge. Even now it is very difficult for untrained lay-people to argue with the medical profession; it has been equally hard to challenge the presumed special knowledge of God of a bishop or priest, and the tendency of both medicine and theology is to present themselves as interpreters of the natural order of things. They retain their power because it is not possible with safety to transgress the norms of behaviour and the roles that God or Science has incorporated into creation, and neither God nor the natural order is likely to change its mind. Thus sociological constructs acquire the force of the inevitable and the immutable, and become very difficult to challenge without exclusion from the community.

So the male was foregrounded as the active, authoritative partner, the law-giver, the decision-maker, the protector, the one who made unfinished woman complete. The only hope for a fulfilled life for a woman was to find such a partner. She was an inferior creature, made only for marriage and procreation, and anyone who did not achieve these states was a failed human being, despised and pitied, particularly by other women who had gained the status and defined sphere of wife and mother. Caroline Norton, who fought to reform the laws regarding married women from the perspective of her own appalling experience, entered into a disastrous marriage because 'the only misfortune I ever particularly dreaded was living and dying a lonely old maid'.² No other relationship could be a substitute. Relations with other women were either competitive or emotionally

and sexually unhealthy and there were no options or exceptions; if you considered your own friendship to be good and valuable you were a latent lesbian, unaware of its true nature, and it was in any case unimportant in comparison with 'real' relationships with men. Scientific discourse was used to buttress this perception as the sexologists classified all friendships between women as emotionally and sexually suspect.

In some ways school-stories appear to reinforce all this, for the surface of the texts is socially unexceptionable. The vast majority of the girls have a future as wives and mothers (indeed, super-fecundity is a characteristic of the genre), and this is seen as the norm. In Elinor Brent-Dyer's *Chalet* series, Jo Bettany's friend Marie, herself already engaged by the time she leaves school, hopes that Jo will marry because 'it is why God created women',³ and marriage is certainly the reward given to most of the characters. Once married, a career has to be abandoned and, although there is the occasional married Headmistress (never living with her husband - the men are either dead or criminals), staff leave school as soon as they marry. It is again Jo (now Maynard) who voices the classic concept of woman's true role when she returns to teaching briefly to help out when several of the senior school staff are involved in a car accident. She is still breast-feeding her latest baby, and the temporary Headmistress chooses to lecture her while Stephen is crying for her, making her so angry that she decides to leave, because 'Stephen must come first. I'm his mother, and it's my real job. Teaching was only an extra'.⁴

Wives are submissive to their husbands. Even Brent-Dyer's Jo Bettany and Janie Lucy, both very active and assertive heroines who marry men who are their friends, have husbands who 'put their foot down' firmly and are listened to, and this is extended into the wider community when even the autocratic Heads of the Chalet School are occasionally subject to the doctors at the Sanatorium, medical authority being always sacrosanct. All this, coupled with plots which are sociologically unrealistic and heroines who are, unbelievably as far as most critics are concerned, more interested in hockey than in boys, has led to the genre being condemned as oppressive and reactionary, but this is an extremely superficial point of view. What a text appears to say has always to be read in conjunction with an awareness of what it does, and an analysis of the texts of

girls' school-stories reveals in the sub-text potent images which are subversive, redemptive and liberating, undermining the discourses of power which have held sway for generations.

All of the major writers of school-stories were profoundly committed Christians, yet their challenge to the discourse of theology is fundamental. It was also undoubtedly unconscious on their part, perhaps an instinctive reaction to the fact that the dogmas bear no relation to the reality of what women are like. Whatever their impulse, they succeeded in creating powerful images of a female deity which was both omnipotent and strongly maternal, thus re-visioning the very character of God and challenging the closed masculine image at a very basic level. I have frequently quoted from the work of post-christian theologians like Mary Daly and Daphne Hampson who have left the church, after many years of struggle, because they have become convinced that Christianity has no room for women because of the irreversibility of the male images themselves. School-stories prove that the image is not irreversible, and that the difficulties faced by women in the church are the product of intractable and sometimes viciously-applied human constructs, which, set in granite as they sometimes seem, can be changed.

Medical discourse, too, is questioned in the imaging of physically strong, active girls and women who indulge in a great deal of mental and bodily activity which does them nothing but good. The 'wounded woman' becomes a laughable and meaningless description as girls are able to discard, along with their corsets, constructs of femininity which demand frailty and physical weakness as the price of womanhood. Because of the strong moral structure associated with the playing of games, women, who had also been seen as morally frail and unreliable, were also able to reclaim the image of moral strength and able to take responsibility for their own lives and decisions. The price of this was that women were required to fit into masculine constructs of morality and become 'gentlemen', but their presence within the construct as an alien gave them a distance which enabled the authors to deconstruct the prevailing ethic and create something more relevant in its place.

The image of the active woman is more far-reaching than is indicated merely by the playing of games. We have seen how the plot conventions of the adventure-tale were

taken over by the writers of school-stories to provide liberating images of pro-active, autonomous heroines who created their own story and had their own adventures, rather than participating in those of others. These heroines made decisions, solved problems, protected their weaker friends, meted out justice to wrong-doers and had fun, and, even if the action itself sometimes strained credulity, the characters created were strong enough for identification to take place. The reader could see herself in and identify with the characters in the story, and thus become the subject of her own life as well. Because the use of the subject in the text is an interrogative one, and because the authors use multiple and morally complex focalizers, this identification is a means of personal growth, not a subjection of the reader to the ideology of the text. The use of adult focalizers in the texts enables identification with women who are powerful, authoritative, in control and, perhaps most important of all, primary in their universe.

All of this was possible only because the school was an all-female community where women could be foregrounded, and this is the aspect of the texts which has been most criticised and, possibly, most feared. Reactions to the school-story have been either to condemn it or to laugh at it (and mockery is easy if one concentrates on the out-dated slang of almost a century ago). Rosemary Auchmuty has noted the way in which parody has been used to defuse the challenge of the texts,⁵ but it is interesting that, with parodies like the *St. Trinians* films, part of the humour is the presentation of the gym-slipped girls as sexual objects, with overtones of a common image in pornography. I do not want to read into these fairly amusing films too heavy a message, but it is a fact that all-female establishments are seen to be both ridiculous and unhealthy, not normal, in a way which is never true of all-male institutions. The message seems to be that woman should not make for herself a space where she is not available to men, for man can exist without woman, but she must not be able to exist without him; if she tries, she is sexualised back into availability.

For many women, however, one of the most potent attractions of the texts is the emphasis on a woman-identified community where deep friendship can be acknowledged and celebrated. Again, the discourse of the scientists is challenged as the uncertainties and ambivalences caused by the theories of the sexologists are cast aside and women live

fulfilled and happy lives with other women, not as sexual partners, but not, either, as flawed failures making the best of a bad job. Women work together, relax together, worry together, support one another, respect one another, love one another in total commitment, and these women are whole. They are not searching for the Platonic 'other half' to make them complete, they are able to relate to one another as autonomous human beings, undiminished and undivided.

School-stories *are* dangerous. It is still true that their message operates at an unconscious level for many women, perhaps because the full implications are too threatening for women who still have to exist in a patriarchal society. However, whether consciously or not, the texts allow women to reclaim their selfhood and to reject the damaging lies they have been told about themselves by so many of the discourses of society. The images provided by school-tales are liberating ones, presenting women as active, strong both physically and morally, powerful and loving. They set women free to see themselves differently, to change, and ultimately to dare to believe that 'it is central, correct and blessed to be a girl'.⁶

- 1 Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman* (London and Sydney: Pan Books, 1987), p.64. First published 1986
- 2 Margaret Forster, *Significant Sisters: The Grassroots of Active Feminism 1839-1939* (Harmondsworth, New York, Australia, Canada: Penguin Books 1986), p.19. First published 1984
- 3 Elinor Brent-Dyer, *The New House at the Chalet School* (London and Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1935), p.30
- 4 Elinor Brent-Dyer, *Gay from China at the Chalet School* (London and Edinburgh: W&R Chambers, 1944), p.112
- 5 Rosemary Auchmuty, *A World of Girls* (London: The Women's Press, 1992), p.206ff.
- 6 Isabel Miller, *Side by Side* (London: The Women's Press, 1996), p.232

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